



ETHIOPIA: Compound structural vulnerabilities facing Christian women under pressure for their faith

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Contents

Preface to in-depth series – Rationale and structure	2
Why a special in-depth country series on Women and Persecution dynamics?	2
Spheres of pressure	3
Categories of pressure.....	3
1. Introduction: The situation in Ethiopia	5
1.1 Broader context for Christians in Ethiopia	5
1.2 The situation of women in Ethiopia	6
2. Domestic sphere	7
2.1 Marriage	8
2.2 Bride price	9
2.3 Domestic violence	9
2.4 Conversion within the family	10
2.5 Polygamy	10
2.6 Forced divorce	11
3. Societal and cultural sphere	12
3.1 Female Genital Mutilation.....	13
3.2 Abduction, rape and forced marriage	14
3.3 Sexual abuse and harassment	15
3.4 Dress codes.....	16
3.5 Female-headed households	16
3.6 Access to employment	18
4. State sphere	19
4.1 Healthcare	20
4.2 State education.....	21
4.3 Impunity	22
5. Conclusion	24

Preface to in-depth series – Rationale and structure

Why a special in-depth country series on Women and Persecution dynamics?

Throughout history, women have been targeted in order to destroy whole societies. The means by which they are under pressure for their faith can become such a normalized part of culture and daily discrimination that they may be overlooked as an effective method of slowly, invisibly and sometimes legally undermining an entire community. Whether attacks are through structural inequalities or outright violence, as documented in Open Doors' World Watch List 2018,¹ they almost always occur in a wider context of violence against women and the inferior status of women: The lower the status of women in a society, the worse will be the violence against women in persecuted groups.

Dr Mariz Tadros provides a recent example of these intersecting vulnerabilities in Iraq:

the suffering of women from religious minorities has reached proportions greater than that of the general female population on account of their systematic targeting. It is distinct from the assault on Iraqi women on account of the politics of the intersection of gender with religious identity....

We may choose to see the sexual enslavement of women belonging to religious minorities, whether sold as slaves, detained for ISIS fighters' sexual exploitation, or in forced marriages as part of a broader spectrum of gender based violence.

True, it is. But it also needs to be seen as targeted genocide.²

While each of the reports in this series focuses on the situation of Christian women, this targeting is not unique to them: It happens to women in almost every religious minority, from Hindus and Ahmadis in Pakistan and Yazidi women under Islamic State, to Muslim women in the West. It is also not to say that all attacks or discrimination against minority Christian women are persecutory: Motive is complex and difficult to prove. However, at the core of religious persecution lies the unequal power relationships between people of different faiths: At the core of violence against women lies the unequal power relationships between men and women. For someone who belongs to two minority groups, the compounded vulnerabilities can make life doubly difficult, even deadly.

Global patterns exist in how women are persecuted, primarily focused on their differences to men and what they represent in their community and family. These attacks utilize culturally-enshrined notions of inferiority, purity and honor. Often they are not reported or measured as persecution, especially if they are viewed as normal within the culture or not seen as 'typical'

¹ "World Watch List 2018." *Open Doors Analytical*, 2018, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-2018/> (password: freedom).

² Tadros, Mariz. "International Women's Day: Solidarity & Iraqi Religious Minority Women." *Institute of Development Studies*, 8 Mar. 2015, available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20180328132609/https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinion/international-women-s-day-solidarity-and-iraqi-religious-minority-women>.

persecution. Underpinning them are deep-rooted societal assumptions regarding women's identity and nature: Crimes committed against women are more likely to engender shame and ostracism than those committed against men, and attackers rely upon this community response. Men are not blamed for being tortured: If a woman is raped she is far more likely to be blamed by both men and other women. Her whole family may be dishonored and fractured by her perceived loss of purity. Her family or community (even her church) may indirectly add to the persecution and trauma she has suffered through their response to her. Shame, coupled with lack of voice and resources, stops many women reporting violence, discrimination or persecution, including to (largely male) church leaders, so even the Church may not hear about persecution which affects women.

Spheres of pressure³

The reports are split into three sections: Domestic, societal and state spheres. However, the complex and interwoven nature of these spheres means that no section or sub-section can be seen outside the context of the others. The complexity will be mapped for each country in a diagram of pressures.

Categories of pressure

The pressures faced by women fall into three broad categories, which are integrated into each of the sections mentioned above:

1. *The direct targeting of Christian women for persecution.* These are not intended by aggressors purely as an attack on an individual woman, but on the men who are supposed to protect her, on the children who rely on her, and on the community of which she is an inextricable part.
2. A) *The areas in which all women within a culture face challenges,* but in which Christian women are particularly vulnerable. Many women may face sexual violence, but Christian converts are more likely to face it. Women's voices may not be listened to in court: Christian women's particularly not, creating complete impunity for attackers. These are areas in which persecution is a matter of the differential between the experience of all women and that of Christian women.

B) The areas in which Christians are discriminated against, but which have a disproportionate effect on women (and thus the whole family). Women disproportionately use public systems and community resources: It is women who collect water and food and

³ Please note that the term "pressure" in this paper is used in a broader sense than in standard WWL methodology and includes violent acts targeting women. In WWL methodology, "pressure" denotes non-violent persecution experienced in all areas of a Christian's life (Private, Family, Community, National and Church life) and "violence" is defined as "the deprivation of physical freedom or as serious bodily or mental harm to Christians or serious damage to their property" (and related incidents), which can potentially occur in all areas of life. For further discussion concerning this distinction, see: WWL Methodology, updated November 2017, pp. 17-21, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/WWL-2018-Methodology-LONG-VERSION-November-2017.pdf> (password: freedom).

access medical services either for their children, or, much more than men (and in different ways to men) for themselves during their reproductive years.

3. *The harmful factors all/many women in a country face*, and in which the Church is, sadly, sometimes complicit, but which cannot be seen as persecutory factors in and of themselves (such as child marriage or lack of education). They do, however, create compounded disadvantages which impact women's ability to thrive, as outlined in *Gendered Persecution: World Watch List 2018 Analysis and Implications*.⁴ Exposing half (or more than half, given global statistics) the members of a church to these difficulties means that when persecution does come, the whole Body is less resilient. These issues may not appear to be related to persecution, but they are pressure points which weaken the whole Church. Persecution reinforces the social, cultural and institutional discrimination that women face in their daily lives and vice versa.

The reports focus on the intersecting vulnerabilities of women, however this is not to present them as 'natural victims' nor to reinforce ideas of the inevitability of violence against them. Nor is it to deny their agency – either in their ability to survive, find means to overcome persecution and be contributing members of their churches, or their complicity in perpetuating the hardships suffered by other women. Recognition and reinforcement of women's agency and resilience is key to healing and overcoming the challenges they face.

The distinct nature of how women are put under pressure for their faith ought not to be fatalistically accepted or ignored as inevitable or culturally neutral: Its strategic nature, and the incremental difference between *how* it happens to Christian as opposed to non-Christian women, needs to be taken into account if the whole Church is to tackle the persecution and daily discriminations which undermine women and, by extension, the Church.

Please note:

- 1) The symbol * indicates that names have been changed for the purposes of security.
- 2) WWL is the abbreviation for the annually published Open Doors World Watch List.

⁴ Fisher, Helene and Miller, Elizabeth. "[Gendered persecution: World Watch List 2018 Analysis and Implications](https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Gendered-persecution-WWL-2018-analysis-and-implications.pdf)." *World Watch Monitor*, 2018, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Gendered-persecution-WWL-2018-analysis-and-implications.pdf>.

1. Introduction: The situation in Ethiopia

Women’s lives in Ethiopia have been improved in recent decades by governmental and NGO efforts, but many still face daily hardships in every area, and a second minority status only compounds this: In areas of Ethiopia where Christian women are in the minority, they face the dual disadvantage of membership of two pressured groups. Tension between the government and religious groups, and inter-ethnic, inter-religious and inter-denominational tensions all play their part, and Christian women are caught at the intersection between these and the wider societal inequalities based upon their gender.

This report highlights the primary areas which need to be tackled to address persecution against women and build their agency and resilience, and thus strengthen the pressured Church as a whole.

1.1 Broader context for Christians in Ethiopia⁵

WWL Year ⁶	WWL Points	WWL Position
2018	62	29
2017	64	22
2016	67	18
2015	61	22
2014	65	17

Figure 1: Open Doors World Watch List points and global ranking of Ethiopia, 2014-2018.

Ethiopia’s population is estimated to be 59.5% Christian (primarily Ethiopian Orthodox, but also Protestant and some Catholics) and 34.5% Muslim. Other groups include those with traditional beliefs and Jehovah’s Witnesses.⁷

As seen in Figure 1, the combined points for pressure and violence towards Christians in Ethiopia have fallen slightly since 2016, mainly due to the changing political situation. However, the fall to 29th position on the global World Watch List (2018) can largely be attributed to increased pressure and/or violence in other countries rather than vast improvement in Ethiopia. The rise of Islamic radicalism at local, regional and national level has seen many funds poured in to spread Islam, particularly amongst those in need (often giving aid in return for conversion to Islam) and through Muslim schools. Particularly in rural areas where Muslims are in the majority, Christians are harassed, denied access to community resources and subjected to violence, including at the instigation of Muslim leaders. Converts to Christianity are ostracized, denied their inheritance and child custody.

⁵ “Country Dossier: Ethiopia”, Open Doors Analytical, *Open Doors*, May 2018. All World Watch Research country dossiers are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/country-dossiers/> (password: freedom).

⁶ The reporting period for each “WWL year” is the November to October period directly prior to the year of publication. E.g. for WWL 2017, the research analysis covered 1 November 2015 – 31 October 2016 and was published in January 2017.

⁷ Estimates according to World Christian Database 2018.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) considers itself the only 'true' Christian denomination. Protestant denominations in particular are seen as a Western religion, and therefore a threat to Ethiopian culture and nationalism, especially with the swift growth of Protestant denominations in recent years. Evangelical churches are criticized and EOC followers at times told not to socialize with Evangelical 'heathens'. Those who leave the EOC for evangelical churches, or EOC members joining reform movements within the EOC, are attacked, sometimes physically, and ostracized by their own family and extended family (although this is less likely in urban areas). Evangelical church leaders and members have been known to retaliate with harassment and derogatory statements of their own towards EOC members.

The EOC also uses government connections to block other churches, e.g. blocking development of non-Orthodox churches, promoting legislation which curtails expansion of non-EOC denominations, and through use of media messaging about Protestants, often by EOC leaders as well as followers. The EOC is de-facto exempt from the legal requirement for religious groups to re-register every three years. However, they are also under pressure from the Government and from Islamic radicalism.

The Government has become increasingly restrictive in recent years, especially of civil and religious rights. There is a great deal of suspicion towards religious groups, especially Christians, and of their ability to organize groups, seeing it as a potential ability to organize regime change. Protestants (especially those from non-traditional denominations) are suspected of being foreign agents trying to bring about regime change and EOC leaders are suspected of supporting opposition groups. Restrictions have been introduced on religious broadcasting services and the teaching of religion in schools, and, at a local level, officials often deny non-traditional churches permits to meet and worship. In 2016 a state of emergency was brought in, involving thousands of arrests, adding to the Government's attempts to protect its own power. Religious freedom is not protected, and persecution of any religious group is not prosecuted (which contributes to antagonism between groups and makes them easier for the Government to control).

There has been a resurgence in ethnic identity since the fall of the Communist government, with some areas seeing Islam as interwoven with ethnic identity, and in other areas Christians being expected to be an active part of traditional religious and cultural rites and facing banishment if they do not. Violence is often played out along intertwined ethnic and religious lines. Muslims and Christians also commonly practice Animist rituals, such as dedicating new-borns to the traditional Animist leaders.

1.2 The situation of women in Ethiopia

Women's status throughout the region tends to be lower than that of men's in all areas of life: women are seen primarily as wives and mothers, and, except in wealthier urban areas, their education and access to healthcare and employment is seen as less important than their brothers'. This impacts cycles of economic dependence and intergenerational poverty, reinforcing negative outcomes in women's health (and that of their children), wellbeing and agency. Women from religious or denominational minorities face the double impact of gender and faith.

2.1 Marriage

Pressure for girls to marry is high: A girl's value, and thus her life chances, are based on her marital status. This is particularly true where access to education and employment are low, and she may have little or no income other than what her husband earns. This can become part of a persecution dynamic where female converts lose their eligibility to marry into the religion or denomination of their upbringing and therefore have a lower social status throughout their lives. A girl's marital chances may also drop if her family have refused to perform female genital mutilation on her (see [Section 3.1](#) below) or if she is seen as 'impure' due to sexual relations or sexual violence prior to marriage (see [Section 3.2](#) below).

The legal age of marriage in Ethiopia is set at 18 in the Family Code (in line with the African Union standard), and legal sanctions, including imprisonment, exist in the Criminal Code. Early marriage is internationally seen as a form of gender-based violence.⁹ Despite strong central government initiatives over the years to discourage early marriage, little is done at a local level to enforce this in a country where 14% of girls are married or in a union before the age of fifteen, and 40% before 18.¹⁰ In addition, many marriages may not be legally registered, or girls may simply co-habit, leaving them with no legal rights.

Rates of early marriage/ union are dropping, but it does require impetus from community and religious leaders, and from communities themselves, to put a stop to the practice. Parents may marry their daughters off young to ensure 'purity', to have one fewer mouth to feed or to obtain the bride price (see next section, 2.2), which can then be used to improve their own or their son's status and chance of marriage. Early marriage is also strongly correlated to ideas about gender roles and women's subordinate status and sexuality: boys are rarely married young.

The husbands in these marriages are often far older than the brides, increasing the risks of domestic violence. Girls are almost always forced to leave education upon their marriage, creating cycles of intergenerational poverty and economic dependence on their husband. The dangers of childbirth to a girl's still-growing body are well-documented: Pregnancy complications, obstetric fistula, obstructed labor and increased maternal and infant mortality are high risks for girls who give birth too young.¹¹

Early marriage rates are higher in rural than urban areas, and the practice is present amongst Christian communities as well as others. By not speaking strongly against early marriages and by agreeing to officiate or bless early marriages, the Church perpetuates the practice and the risks which go with it, endangering girls, their children and their marriages. Given that the Church is made up of families, this places great strain on the very core of the Church itself, ultimately weakening its strength in the face of pressure and its witness to society.

⁹ "Why Is Child Marriage a Form of Violence against Women and Girls?" *Girls Not Brides*, 7 Oct. 2014, available at: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/why-is-child-marriage-a-form-of-violence-against-women-and-girls/>.

¹⁰ "Ethiopia." *Girls Not Brides*, accessed May 2018, available at: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/ethiopia/>.

¹¹ "Ending Child Marriage in Africa." *Human Rights Watch*, 22 Feb. 2017, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/12/09/ending-child-marriage-africa>.

2.2 Bride price

The custom of bride price is directly related to early marriage and to ideas about women's sexual purity. The more 'pure' a girl is perceived to be, the higher the price her family can ask for her: the younger she is, the more likely she is to be a virgin. The price, and the form it takes, varies between ethnic groups and between urban and rural communities, but can be up to half the wealth of a potential husband, leaving a newly-married couple in a weakened financial position.

The practice speaks volumes about the perceived value of girls. Seifu Taddess, CARE Ethiopia's Health Union Project Manager, says that:

Bride price often negatively colors the terms of the marriage from the outset[;] where women are viewed as property to be bought and sold the wife forfeits her decision-making position within the household.¹²

UNICEF also states that "girls are effectively being used as currency to secure the futures of other family members."¹³ Girls themselves often have little influence over who they marry. While the practice is supposed to reflect the value of girls and gratitude to her parents, in practice it amounts to little more than the commodification of women.

The practice of bride price is also linked to a rise in abduction and rape (see Section 3.3), as the high price of a wife pushes men to find a way to lessen the financial value placed on girls by intentionally destroying a chosen girl's perceived purity and making her otherwise unmarriageable.

The Church suffers when this practice exists within the community, as the means of creation for the foundational relational unit becomes based upon either the commodification of one of the parties or the tainting of one party (the de-valuing only falling upon the girl).

2.3 Domestic violence

Domestic violence is interwoven in each of the challenges faced by women in the home and family and provides a background and a context in which related forms of violence, harmful traditional practices and discrimination against women and girls occur. Data on domestic violence reveals just how engrained attitudes to women are across the whole population: 2016 World Bank figures show that 63% of Ethiopian women believe that a man is justified in beating his wife for any of a number of reasons (an encouraging drop from 84.5% in 2000).¹⁴ Freedom House reports that "Enforcement of the law against rape and domestic abuse is patchy, and cases routinely stall in the courts."¹⁵

¹² CARE Ethiopia and National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia, quoted in [Ethiopia: Bride Price Key in Increasing Rate of Rape](http://forwarduk.org.uk/283-2/), Forward, 14 Apr. 2008, available at: <http://forwarduk.org.uk/283-2/>.

¹³ Jones, Nicola, et al. "Surprising Trends in Child Marriage in Ethiopia." UNICEF, March 2016, p.3, available at: <http://forwarduk.org.uk/283-2/>.

¹⁴ If a wife burns the food, neglects the children, goes out without telling her husband, argues with him or refuses him sex. "Women Who Believe a Husband Is Justified in Beating His Wife (Any of Five Reasons) (%)." *World Bank*, 2016, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.VAW.REAS.ZS?locations=ET>.

¹⁵ "Ethiopia." *Freedom House*, 2 May 2017, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/ethiopia>.

The injuries and psychological impact on women as a result of violence in the home, in particular when it happens over a long period of time, seriously affects their ability to function in daily life: activities such as ability to learn at school, raise children, find employment or hold onto their faith are all diminished. Relations with their abuser are complex – particularly where economic and social status are dependent on the abuser – and the fracturing of families in this way cannot help but compromise Church communities when domestic violence is present amongst them, either as a result of religious persecution or for other reasons, including women’s lower social status.

2.4 Conversion within the family

It is common for a female convert to Christianity from Islam or Animism (or from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to Protestantism or Catholicism), to face pressure and violence. This often begins with verbal pressure from her family to encourage her to recant her faith and as a reprisal for the shame brought on the family by her conversion. She may be kept confined to the home and subjected to assault, or the family may stop protecting her from reprisals in the community. Alternatively, she may be forced to leave the home, and her husband and extended family may also threaten to remove the children from her, especially her sons. If she is left with the children, she may find that their father refuses financial support, leaving her destitute and with the responsibility of care for young lives.

Workitu¹⁶ was beaten regularly by her husband for converting from Islam to Christianity; she was threatened by the community and eventually murdered by her husband and a neighbor. According to her church leaders, Workitu had written to the local police and governmental authorities saying that her husband threatened to kill her unless she returned to Islam and that she feared for her life. The letter was ignored and they later denied they had received anything. This level of impunity and lack of protection for Christians is commonly seen when violent recriminations are meted out for the sake of honor and to encourage converts to recant their new faith.

Some parents may force their daughter to marry, in order to avoid family shame, when they find out she has converted. One fifteen-year-old Christian convert managed to escape from her parents before she was forced to marry a non-Christian man. Her church was able to negotiate with her parents, who agreed not to force the marriage.¹⁷ Others are unable to do this.

2.5 Polygamy

Although prohibited under the Equality Clause of the Federal Constitution, and carrying legal sanctions under the Penal Code, polygamy is practiced in rural Ethiopia. While levels of polygamy are dropping slightly, the national prevalence was 12% in 2005 (down from 14% in 2000), with wide regional and demographic variations: 3% in Amhara and Addis Ababa (both predominately

¹⁶ “[Christian Woman Martyred in Ethiopia Leaves a Strong Witness.](https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/christian-woman-martyred-in-ethiopia-leaves-a-strong-witness/)” Open Doors USA, 19 June 2017, available at: <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/christian-woman-martyred-in-ethiopia-leaves-a-strong-witness/>.

¹⁷ Unpublished Open Doors research, 2018.

Ethiopian Orthodox) up to 27% in Gambela (60% Protestant, 30% Orthodox, 9% Muslim and 4% Catholic). The high rate amongst Protestants in some areas is attributed to the recent growth of Protestantism in Ethiopia, with cultural practices amongst converts not yet having died out (and some converts may already be in polygamous unions).

Girls' education also impacts polygamous marriages, with 3% of women who have had secondary or higher education in polygamous marriages, compared to 13% of those with no education.¹⁸

While first wives are generally given greater status than subsequent wives, if a husband is displeased with her (e.g. if she has converted), he may disinherit his first wife, or take her existing property, when he marries a second wife. Social pressure often limits the ability of women to seek justice. He will usually share limited resources and income with the wife (and her children) who he favors most: where women have no other access to income this can bring severe hardship. It may also become part of a persecution dynamic where a wife converts: Her husband may take a new wife from his own faith.

With polygamy tied into women's poverty, low education and potential exploitation within marriage, it becomes a balance between two dynamics: is it better for women to be in a polygamous union than none at all, or are polygamy and the factors attached to it injustices which detract from women's ability to thrive? With polygamy clearly present amongst some Christian communities, the Church also has a responsibility to work against any factor which undermines women's wellbeing (including the dangers associated with not marrying) and that of their wider families, if for no other reason than to strengthen the whole body.

2.6 Forced divorce

In some cases, husbands choose to force divorce through unilateral repudiation: culture and custom negate the right to mutual consent for divorce for women. In areas under Sharia, a husband may repeat 'I divorce you' three times to end the marriage (a custom known as Talaq). Although the Ethiopian Government abolished both Talaq and the constitutional provision conferring marital power on the husband as the head of the family, adding additional grounds for divorce by mutual consent of the spouses, Sharia courts are officially entitled to settle disputes concerning marital, personal and family rights as the Constitution upholds customary and religious laws.

Often, customary and religious laws are discriminatory both against women and, where Christians are a minority, to them too, and local authorities can be complicit in persecution or, through inaction, allow persecution to continue. Where cultural heritage is strong, such as in northern Ethiopia, and family and community honor are closely linked to religious belief, women who convert to Christianity or to a different denomination are especially at risk.

¹⁸ "Ethiopia." *Ireland: Refugee Documentation Centre*, 29 Aug. 2011, Q14320, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/4e7b255e2.html>.

LEFT WITH NOTHING

WHEN BELEN, FROM NORTHERN ETHIOPIA, CONVERTED TO CHRISTIANITY, HER HUSBAND LEFT, RE-MARRIED AND FAILED TO PAY CHILD CONTRIBUTIONS; HER ELDER BROTHER BROUGHT FALSE CHARGES AGAINST HER LEADING TO LOSS OF INHERITED LAND AND FINANCES. SHE WAS LEFT ON THE BRINK OF IMPRISONMENT FOR DEBTS AND HER CHILDREN ON THE BRINK OF BECOMING BEGGARS.

For women who have had informal unions or customary marriages, which are often not legally registered in any case, they are left with no legal protection if their husband or partner abandons them or forces them to leave the home.

As seen in the case of Belen (see box),¹⁹ this translates into several layers of vulnerability for Christian women: Local authorities may deny women their legal inheritance, child benefits, favor the testimony of majority religion members, fail to investigate harassment, either simply because they are women or because they are additionally members of a religious or ethnic minority. In the majority of cases, family violence against Christian converts would be considered a domestic dispute to be resolved by the family or, in tribal cultures, by the tribal leader.

3. Societal and cultural sphere

A regional tendency throughout Sub-Saharan Africa is that boys and men are perceived as more valuable than girls and women. Women, too, see and conduct themselves in this light and often repeat the cycle of their treatment as inferior (See section 2.3 above on attitudes of women to being beaten by their husbands). This applies to all areas of life, from family dynamics right through to credibility in court cases; from priority family finances for schooling and employment training through to workplace opportunities. It also translates into blame for the woman when something bad happens to her or she is targeted. A woman's status comes largely through her father or husband: if she loses her father or husband, her status is severely diminished in the broader community.

Open Doors research indicates that violence against women as a form of persecution is common at the hands of the community as well as the family, as illustrated by the case of Workitu, above. Amongst Protestant women, those most vulnerable to attacks are converts from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Animism and Islam, as religious identity is closely linked to cultural and ethnic

¹⁹ "Ethiopia." *Open Doors UK*, available at: <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/countries/ethiopia/>, accessed May 2018.

heritage as well as family honor. After a government drive to encourage citizens to return to traditional Ethiopian Animist religions, some extreme interpretations of these beliefs have led to brutally violent incidents against men, women and children: an attack by Animists against a village church west of Addis Ababa in 2015 saw women, children and men attacked with machetes and sticks, killing one church leader. Days later, Dinke, an active female evangelist, was strangled and left for dead: she recovered but did not feel safe enough to return to her village.²⁰

3.1 Female Genital Mutilation

Under various instruments of international law,²¹ female genital mutilation (FGM) is classified variously as extreme violence, torture, cruel and inhuman treatment and a violation of rights to life, equality and dignity. It was banned in Ethiopia in 2004, but the practice continues. 65.2% of women and girls have undergone the practice, with 64% of those cut between 0-4 years old.²² FGM is viewed as a way of keeping girls 'pure', controlling their sexuality and ensuring that they are virgins at marriage. The practice is ingrained in the culture among people of all faiths and considered in many cases as equivalent to male circumcision, despite being far more severe and dangerous. Prevalence varies between ethnic groups, rural and urban populations and is inversely correlated to higher levels of wealth and education. 82% of Muslim women aged 15-49, 54.2% of Orthodox women and 65.8% of Protestant women have undergone FGM.²³

FGM is usually performed by non-medically trained traditional practitioners, un-anaesthetized, under non-sterile conditions. Aside from the immediate risk of shock, trauma and septicaemia, it leaves permanent damage and lifelong health problems in many cases, contributing to high maternal and infant mortality. Where persecution or poverty limits women's access to healthcare, the health problems related to this cultural practice can be compounded. Ongoing health issues like this can severely limit a woman's wellbeing, her marriage and her ability to fully function as a mother, income-earner and thriving member of a resilient Church. If the practice is widespread across a community, half the congregation can be affected in this way and are likely to perpetuate it upon their own daughters. Given the detrimental effects on a congregation, churches cannot afford to let this remain a silent issue.

Further, the Church can be a powerful force for increasing the health of a whole community. Girls Not Brides/ World Vision UK report the impact of religious leaders becoming involved in the campaign against FGM, and quote one religious leader (religion not specified) as saying, "A religious leader not circumcising his daughter... is a much more powerful symbol than

²⁰ "Ethiopian Village Church Attacked." *World Watch Monitor*, 13 Oct. 2015, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/10/ethiopian-village-church-attacked/>.

²¹ List of international and regional laws covering FGM, including the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, available at <http://www.endvawnow.org/en/articles/645-sources-of-international-human-rights-law-on-female-genital-mutilation.html>

²² "Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)." *World Health Organization*, 1 June 2016, available at: <http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/prevalence/en/>.

²³ "Ethiopia." *28 Too Many*, 2018, available at: <https://www.28toomany.org/country/ethiopia/>.

imprisoning circumcisers, or fining the family.”²⁴ Rates of FGM are dropping as campaigns against the practice have stepped up, but support for the practice stood at 31.4% in 2012.²⁵

However, campaigns to prevent FGM have also had a negative impact in some communities: where communities have abandoned the most severe form of FGM for health reasons, girls are married even earlier in order to preserve their perceived purity. Intervention in one area can adversely affect another area if harmful practices are not tackled holistically.²⁶

3.2 Abduction, rape and forced marriage

It has long been the custom, in parts of Ethiopia, to abduct and rape girls in order to bring down their bride price and/ or force them into marriages to which neither they nor their families have consented (although some of these ‘abductions’ are arranged between a couple when the potential husband cannot afford the bride price). Once a girl has been raped, her family will often agree to allow her to marry her attacker because, now that she is perceived as ‘impure’, no one else will marry her. Data disaggregated by religion is difficult to obtain on this practice, but it does appear to happen across all religious groupings (and within religious groupings, not just as a means of ‘stealing’ women from a different faith or denomination), often being seen as entirely normal practice.^{27, 28} Across the country, 69% of marriages are a result of abduction and rape, with incidences running as high as 80% in areas such as Oromia.²⁹ Some cases have been recorded of Christian girls abducted by those of other faiths or denominations, forcing their marriage into a faith to which they do not, by choice, belong.³⁰

The practice also feeds into low educational levels for girls: parents are afraid to send their daughters to school in case they are abducted whilst walking there (indicating that while it may be viewed as ‘normal’, it is not seen as either inevitable or desirable). Paradoxically, the more education a girl has, the less likely she is to be abducted and the better her awareness of her legal rights and access to justice mechanisms if she is abducted. Girls Not Brides/ World Vision³¹

²⁴ Williams, Nell. “[Early Marriage and Female Genital Cutting in Ethiopia: Exploring the Links.](https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/early-marriage-female-genital-cutting-ethiopia-exploring-links/)” *Girls Not Brides*, 5 June 2014, available at: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/early-marriage-female-genital-cutting-ethiopia-exploring-links/>.

²⁵ “[Ethiopia: Statistics.](https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ethiopia_statistics.html)” *UNICEF*, 24 Dec. 2013, available at: https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ethiopia_statistics.html.

²⁶ Williams, Nell. 2014.

²⁷ Hari, Johann. “[Kidnapped, Raped, Married. The Extraordinary Rebellion of Ethiopia's Abducted Wives.](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/kidnapped-raped-married-the-extraordinary-rebellion-of-ethiopias-abducted-wives-1922263.html)” *The Independent*, 17 Mar. 2010, available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/kidnapped-raped-married-the-extraordinary-rebellion-of-ethiopias-abducted-wives-1922263.html>.

²⁸ Cole, Diane. “[Kidnapped And Raped At Age 13, She's Finally Found Justice.](https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/03/11/470075802/kidnapped-and-raped-at-age-13-shes-finally-found-justice)” *NPR*, 11 Mar. 2016, available at: <https://choice.npr.org/index.html?origin=https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/03/11/470075802/kidnapped-and-raped-at-age-13-shes-finally-found-justice>.

²⁹ CARE Ethiopia and National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia, quoted in: “[Ethiopia: Bride Price Key in Increasing Rate of Rape.](http://forwarduk.org.uk/283-2/)” *Forward*, 14 Apr. 2008, available at: <http://forwarduk.org.uk/283-2/>.

³⁰ Unpublished Open Doors research, 2018.

³¹ Williams, Nell. “[Early Marriage and Female Genital Cutting: Exploring the Links.](https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/early-marriage-female-genital-cutting-ethiopia-exploring-links/)” *Girls Not Brides*, 5 June 2014, available at: <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/early-marriage-female-genital-cutting-ethiopia-exploring-links/>.

also links the practice of abduction and forced marriage to early marriage (and the concomitant loss of education): parents will ensure their daughters are married young to prevent abduction, and those abducted are frequently as young as thirteen or fourteen, or even younger.

Taking the attacker to court is rare, despite the practice being illegal. Parents may lack funds or other means of access to justice, and a major deterrent is the shame felt by the girl and her family: often her parents would rather she marry her attacker than suffer the shame of having been raped, especially given that she is unlikely to find another husband once the attack is known about. Those who do try to prosecute the attacker are often forced to leave the area due to shaming and reprisals.

REPRISALS AGAINST CONVERTS

OPEN DOORS RESEARCH REVEALED THE STORY OF JALENE, WHO GREW UP IN AN ANIMIST FAMILY BUT CONVERTED TO CHRISTIANITY AFTER A LONG STRUGGLE WITH ILLNESS. SHE WAS THROWN OUT OF HER FAMILY, AND ON HER WAY HOME FROM CHURCH ONE DAY WAS RAPED MULTIPLE TIMES AND LEFT FOR DEAD. HER ATTACKERS WERE EVENTUALLY JAILED, BUT HER FAMILY BLAMED JALENE'S DECISION TO FOLLOW CHRIST FOR THE ATTACK WHICH HAD 'SHAMED' THE FAMILY.

3.3 Sexual abuse and harassment

Women are frequently the water collectors for their households. The recent drought has led to the closure of water collection points and the need to walk further and to more isolated areas for water, which has increased the risk of sexual violence against all women who perform this vital daily task. Walking to school or to places of employment also means danger for women and girls, causing some parents to withdraw their daughters from school to avoid attack. This is a vulnerable point for Christian families under pressure.

Rape and sexual harassment is also used against women who convert as a means to threaten and pressurize them to recant their faith and/ or as punishment for conversion.³²

Even when a survivor is from a Christian family, the shame felt by the family may mean she is prevented from speaking about the attack, including to police or to potential sources of support such as other church members. Women are generally economically dependent on their husbands or fathers, so the cost of speaking out is simply too high if she risks being ostracized by her family for having done so.

Church responses to sexual violence, when they do hear about it, have an additional impact on the outcome for women and girls. When churches integrate survivors, recovery is more likely

³² Boxed story: "[What Real Love Looks Like.](https://opendoorsinternational.exposure.co/what-real-love-looks-like)" *Open Doors*, 3 Mar. 2017, available at: <https://opendoorsinternational.exposure.co/what-real-love-looks-like>.

and trauma less severe. However, shaming them or failing to take their trauma and injuries seriously leads to lifelong consequences, weakens survivors' families and ultimately undermines the churches themselves.

3.4 Dress codes

Where Christian women dress more freely in bigger cities with more Western influence, inappropriate/critical comments and touching is more common at the hands of the more conservative Orthodox members. In the rural areas there is no difference in the way Christians and Muslims dress. According to Open Doors research, in Muslim areas of the country, it is too dangerous for Christian women from a Muslim background to display crosses or Christian images.³³

3.5 Female-headed households

When marriage is the basis for women's social status and access to social and economic resources, widowhood and divorce impose a disproportionate burden on them. They may inherit nothing or even lose their children to their former husband's family. A woman who is thrown out of her home following conversion (or sexual violence) will find it far harder than a man in the same situation to survive: She is more likely to be attacked, and less likely to find a safe place to live or an income (often having been reliant on her husband or father's income to survive). Even those married women who are left alone through displacement, their husbands' imprisonment or economic migration are unprotected and vulnerable, often struggling to feed their families.

This is not a small problem: Across Africa, one in ten women over the age of 14 are widowed and 6% are divorced, with many others having been widowed or divorced at some point in their lives. This does not affect men in the same way: They do not face the same stigmatisation and physical vulnerability as women, they are more likely to die in accidents or conflict, more likely to marry much younger girls or women (and so pre-decease them) and, if widowed or divorced, they are more likely to remarry or have other living wives and to be unaffected in terms of livelihood and safe housing.

Many violent incidents resulting in fatality are meted out to those considered core members of church and household leaders, and in the majority of cases these are men. Across Sub-Saharan Africa violent persecution, all too often resulting in murder, robs families of fathers and leaves grieving families vulnerable to long-term consequences. The resilience of families to such losses is often low due to the socio-economic conditions facing women and vulnerability to hostility from the community.

Poverty and near starvation are common threats for female-headed households left to provide for large families. With low levels of education, the most easily accessible means to break the

³³ Unpublished Open Doors research, 2018.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF WIDOWHOOD

BUZE AND HER NINE CHILDREN WERE LEFT TRAUMATIZED BY THE BRUTAL MURDER OF HER HUSBAND IN AUGUST 2013. THEY SUFFERED FINANCIAL INSTABILITY AND FELT TOO DEFENCELESS TO ATTEND CHURCH TOGETHER AS A FAMILY FOR FEAR OF THEFT OF THEIR HOME AND LIVESTOCK WHILE THEY WERE GONE.

cycle of poverty is subsistence farming or, at times, prostitution. However, the threat of theft from fields or physical or sexual attack is then heightened.

After the murder of her husband (see box)³⁴ the ensuing difficulties facing Buze and her nine children are emblematic. Her husband was killed for refusing return to Animism. The death left the already financially-pressed family at real risk of not being able to make ends meet since Buze's husband had been the main household breadwinner.

Similarly, Aloni was left widowed with eight children to fend for when her husband was shot by a community member for his conversion to Christianity. She lacked the necessary employment skills and education for generating income for her family.³⁵

Sintayehu, who lives in Muslim-majority northern Ethiopia, had, in contrast, been relatively financially comfortable before her husband – a successful restaurant owner - was murdered. However, Sintayehu herself did not have expertise in business and found it difficult to provide for her family.³⁶

Beza, whose husband was murdered in the attack west of Addis Ababa by Animist villagers in 2015 was fearful of her family's future due to her ongoing battle with pneumonia which reduced her capacity to work and provide for her family of eight children.³⁷

Female-headed households are also at greater risk of poverty because a mother cannot leave her children in search of work elsewhere, whereas a man may leave his wife and children to look for work. In poorer areas, these households often struggle to keep their children in education as the sons are needed for labor and the girls to help raise the younger siblings or take on other domestic chores.

The long-term devastation of the family and related vulnerabilities such as poverty can mean they become reliant on their church. Often there is pressure for a widow to re-marry lest she be considered a burden for the church to support financially, particularly if she has lost access to any resources her husband may have owned, such as land. In some cases, widows return to their

³⁴ "I Loved Him! He Loved Me! He Was My Protection." *Open Doors*, 5 May 2017, available at: <https://opendoorsinternational.exposure.co/i-loved-him-he-loved-me-he-was-my-protection>.

³⁵ *What Real Love Looks Like*, *Open Doors*, 3 Mar. 2017, available at <https://opendoorsinternational.exposure.co/what-real-love-looks-like>.

³⁶ "Ethiopia: 7 Years of OD Support Keeps Sintayehu from Giving up the Faith." *Open Doors Hong Kong*, 28 July 2016, available at: <https://www.opendoors.org.hk/en/2016/07/4296/>.

³⁷ "Ethiopian Village Church Attacked." *World Watch Monitor*, 13 Oct. 2015, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/10/ethiopian-village-church-attacked/>.

fathers: if their father is not a Christian this may hinder participation in church life and/ or lead to tension and abuse in the home.

Women and children are seen as easier targets for everyday harassment and hostility. Open Doors field workers explain that in Ethiopian culture, children whose fathers are murdered are considered 'children of the late man', signalling that they have no father to care for or protect them. They also indicate widows are made to believe they are a curse or bad luck to their husband and without value. She is 'without a shield'. The women themselves have often taken on traditional beliefs that the husband protects the family spiritually against witchcraft: once that protection is removed, they hold great fears that they are susceptible to witchcraft, and the world around them becomes a very hostile place.

Leading a family with the weight of these beliefs, guiding their children through the emotional and spiritual challenges of losing a father or of his absence from the family, and being at the brunt of persecution for their Christian faith can be overwhelming for mothers. In each of the cases mentioned, the children faced bullying at the hands of perpetrators' own children and other hostile families in the community, in addition to struggling with the pain of loss.

3.6 Access to employment

Labor force participation rates³⁸ for females are statistically higher than in other areas of Sub-Saharan Africa at 77%, compared to 63% region-wide. However, this is greatly dependent upon the area of the country: rural areas see fewer opportunities for women to gain the skills necessary for income-generating work. It is also below the participation rate for men, 88% of whom are in the labor market. Women traditionally have few land or property rights, and are more likely to be hired in poorly-paid domestic or agricultural work. Ethiopia is no exception to the many countries in which discriminatory legal provisions concerning employment access equality have been repealed, but where private businesses continue in many cases to hire men in preference to women.

Access to education is key to breaking the cycle of poverty for women in Ethiopia. Girls routinely taken out of education in order to be married face a future of economic dependency and potential destitution. The World Bank estimates that the early marriage of girls costs the Ethiopian economy billions of dollars in women's lost earnings,³⁹ and, in terms of the pressurized Church, for Christian women to have the skills and knowledge to find employment and be better aware of their rights and value is integral to survival. Without this, resilience to acts of persecution which leave them as sole breadwinner or at risk of losing property, for example, is much lower.

³⁸ *International Labor Organization (ILO)* estimates retrieved in September 2018 for male and female labor force participation rates (age 15+) in Ethiopia, and female labor participation rate Sub-Saharan Africa: *World Bank*, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=ZG>.

³⁹ "Child Marriage May Cost Ethiopia Billions of Dollars." *Global Partnership for Education*, 4 May 2018, available at: <https://www.globalpartnership.org/news-and-media/news/child-marriage-may-cost-ethiopia-billions-dollars>.

4. State sphere

Article 25. Right to equality

All persons are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to the equal protection of the law. In this respect, the law shall guarantee to all persons equal and effective protection without discrimination on grounds of race, nation, nationality, or other social origin, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, property, birth or other status.

Article 34. Marital, personal and family rights

1. Men and women, without any distinction as to race, nation, nationality or religion, who have attained marriageable age as defined by law, have the right to marry and found a family. They have equal rights while entering into, during marriage and at the time of divorce. Laws shall be enacted to ensure the protection of rights and interests of children at the time of divorce.
2. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.
3. The family is the natural and fundamental unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.
4. In accordance with provisions to be specified by law, a law giving recognition to marriage concluded under systems of religious or customary laws may be enacted.
5. This Constitution shall not preclude the adjudication of disputes relating to personal and family laws in accordance with religious or customary laws, with the consent of the parties to the dispute. Particulars shall be determined by law.

Article 35. Rights of women

1. Women shall, in the enjoyment of rights and protections provided for by this Constitution, have equal right with men.
2. Women have equal rights with men in marriage as prescribed by this Constitution.
3. The historical legacy of inequality and discrimination suffered by women in Ethiopia taken into account, women, in order to remedy this legacy, are entitled to affirmative measures. The purpose of such measures shall be to provide special attention to women so as to enable them compete and participate on the basis of equality with men in political, social and economic life as well as in public and private institutions.
4. The State shall enforce the right of women to eliminate the influences of harmful customs. Laws, customs and practices that oppress or cause bodily or mental harm to women are prohibited.
5. A) Women have the right to maternity leave with full pay. The duration of maternity leave shall be determined by law taking into account the nature of the work, the health of the mother and the well-being of the child and family.
B) Maternity leave may, in accordance with the provisions of law, include prenatal leave with full pay.

6. Women have the right to full consultation in the formulation of national development policies, the designing and execution of projects, and particularly in the case of projects affecting the interests of women.
7. Women have the right to acquire, administer, control, use and transfer property. In particular, they have equal rights with men with respect to use, transfer, administration and control of land. They shall also enjoy equal treatment in the inheritance of property.
8. Women shall have a right to equality in employment, promotion, pay, and the transfer of pension entitlements.
9. To prevent harm arising from pregnancy and childbirth and in order to safeguard their health, women have the right of access to family planning education, information and capacity.⁴⁰

Despite these constitutional provisions for equality, laws against violence against women and central government campaigns against early marriage and FGM, women's equality cannot be achieved by government alone: local law enforcement officials, communities and families must adhere to the laws and buy into the campaigns for them to be effective.

In addition, constitutional provision for the recognition of marriage under religious and customary laws, and "the adjudication of disputes relating to personal and family laws in accordance with religious or customary laws" can create parallel legal systems in which women, and particularly minority women and converts, find no recourse to justice, and can perpetuate customs such as forced and early marriage and justify domestic violence.

Ethiopia ranks 108/176 countries on Transparency International's 2016 list:⁴¹ Corruption amongst public sector workers never fails to disadvantage the most vulnerable members of society, especially when access to basic public services such as health, education and law enforcement are dependent on bribes.

Encouragingly, Ethiopia has seen a rise of female parliamentarians from 2% in 1999 to 39% today.⁴² In the longer term, this should have an impact on the implementations of laws and policies designed to protect women.

4.1 Healthcare

Although health facilities depend on the area of the country, in general access to healthcare is limited. Women's health is affected by violence, FGM, early marriage, pregnancy and childbirth and by the practice of abduction, rape and forced marriage. Christian women are particularly discriminated against in access to healthcare in poorer areas where they are in the minority, such as the Muslim-dominated Ethiopian Somali State and other such regions.⁴³ As an

⁴⁰ Ethiopian Constitution 1994. *Constitute Project*, available at: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Ethiopia_1994?lang=en, accessed May 2018.

⁴¹ "Corruption Perceptions Index 2016." *Transparency International*, 25 Jan. 2017, available at: https://www.transparency.org/news/feature/corruption_perceptions_index_2016.

⁴² "Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments: Ethiopia." *World Bank*, available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS?locations=ET>, accessed May 2018.

⁴³ Unpublished Open Doors research, 2018.

aggravating factor in persecution, a woman who is physically unwell, weak, excluded, depressed or traumatized is a far easier target for attack.

One major problem for women is obstetric fistula, caused primarily by FGM and early childbirth. Fistula can lead to ongoing health problems for girls and women, and the accompanying incontinence, discharge and odor mean that they are often ostracized from their families and communities as well, further undermining quality of life and ability to participate socially, economically or in church or other religious gatherings. A large-scale effort has been made in the country to provide fistula clinics and these can be seen in many communities. While these efforts are valuable, the problem will only stop once FGM and early childbirth are stopped.

Until recent years, obstetric care suffered a severe lack of investment, reflecting the lack of value placed on a vital aspect of women's healthcare. UNICEF reports that "The 2008 review of the sector noted for example that there were only three midwives employed in Afar region, all of them male and from outside the region. This situation will likely soon change as efforts are made to increase secondary school education in Afar including encouraging more girls to train as midwives. Similar efforts are underway in other regions."⁴⁴

Women's vulnerability can again be seen in levels of HIV: whereas 0.8% of men aged 15-49 are HIV+, amongst women this rate is 1.3%.⁴⁵ Access to healthcare and influence over condom use are vital for women in protecting themselves and their children against infection. Early marriage, however, also leaves girls less able to negotiate contraceptive use with an older husband.

The malnutrition rate is 25% amongst women of childbearing age:⁴⁶ where custom dictates that women eat last in the family, regardless of their needs when pregnant or breastfeeding, any shortage will fall most heavily upon them. An out-of-favor wife may suffer even more. Where competition for basic community resources like food and water is strong (such as during the current drought), religious minority women and their children will suffer the most.

The combination of the above health and nutrition vulnerability of women and girls creates a physical vulnerability for the Church which can be exploited, or which will exacerbate the impact of other events such as those described in previous sections.

4.2 State education

Numerous studies⁴⁷ have linked girls' education to increased life chances for both them and their future children, a higher chance of accessing healthcare and trained birth attendants, less likelihood that their own daughters will undergo FGM, and, in Ethiopia, a lower chance of abduction into forced marriage. Government participation in the global movement for greater access to education and higher quality education provision has seen levels of school enrolment

⁴⁴ "Ethiopia: Gender Equality." *UNICEF*, p.21, available at: [https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/Chapter_3_\(72dpi\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/ethiopia/Chapter_3_(72dpi).pdf), accessed May 2018.

⁴⁵ "Ethiopia", *UNAIDS*, 31 Jan. 2018, available at: <http://www.unaids.org/en/regionscountries/countries/ethiopia>.

⁴⁶ "Ethiopia: Nutrition Profile." *U.S. Agency for International Development*, 8 Feb. 2016, available at: <https://www.usaid.gov/what-we-do/global-health/nutrition/countries/ethiopia-nutrition-profile>.

⁴⁷ For example, "Girls' Education." *World Bank*, available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducation> accessed June 2018.

in metropolitan areas of the country increase.⁴⁸ Literacy rates for girls and women have risen to 69% and there is better access to higher education. Nevertheless, the challenge remains in rural areas and among pastoralist communities where illiteracy is at 71% for women, with some regional variation.

It is not considered as important for a woman to be literate and numerate and to develop work skills, especially in rural areas, as her husband is expected to provide and a wife to raise children. Therefore, where family finances are stretched, sons often take priority for schooling. This is despite high levels of female-headed households reinforcing the necessity to educate girls as well as boys.

In addition, schools often lack teachers invested in girls' education,⁴⁹ and may lack secure and private sanitation facilities: many girls leave school because they may be attacked while using sanitation facilities or when facilities are inappropriate for girls during menstruation.

Early marriage is an added factor in girls' non-attendance. When a girl marries, she will usually stop her education in order to do so (if she is still in school anyway): 12% of married girls aged 15-19 are enrolled in school compared to 60% of unmarried girls.⁵⁰ If a girl becomes pregnant, she will almost certainly drop out of school.

For a Christian woman, illiteracy means an inability to read the Bible for herself, decreasing the extent to which she is able to find solace in the Word and the likelihood that she will hold onto her faith in the face of hardship, be that poverty, heading a household, ostracism or direct persecution. The next generation will also be affected when she is unable to pass her faith on in this way, particularly if she is raising children alone. Her effectiveness in ministry and her spiritual (as well as economic) self-sufficiency are impacted, and she is also less likely to know what to do and how to seek justice for attacks against her.

4.3 Impunity

According to Transparency International, citizens in East Africa pay bribes to the police and judicial services more than to any other public sector.⁵¹ Inability or unwillingness to pay a bribe can seriously impede access to the legal system. Freedom House adds:

The government recently established a women's affairs ministry, and the Parliament has passed legislation designed to protect women's rights in a number of areas. In practice, however, women's rights are routinely violated.... Societal norms and limited infrastructure prevent many women from seeking legal redress for their grievances.⁵²

⁴⁸ "Education in Ethiopia." *Global Partnership for Education*, available at: <https://www.globalpartnership.org/country/ethiopia>, accessed May 2018.

⁴⁹ "Global Partnership for Girls' and Women's Education: Ethiopia Factsheet." *UNESCO*, 2012, available at: http://www.unesco.org/eri/cp/factsheets_ed/ET_EDFactSheet.pdf.

⁵⁰ Girls Not Brides, 2018.

⁵¹ "Most People Pay Bribes for Public Services in East Africa." *Transparency International*, 7 Dec. 2011, available at: https://www.transparency.org/news/pressrelease/most_people_pay_bribes_for_public_services_in_east_africa.

⁵² "Ethiopia." *Freedom House*, 2007, available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2007/ethiopia?page=22&year=2007&country=7175>.

Impunity or lenient sentencing coupled with a lack of protection, financial support, vocational training or trauma care compounds the challenges faced by victims and leaves women open to further hostility and threats from the community and perpetrators, making it near-impossible to remain in their village: Sintayehu (mentioned in [Section 3.5](#) above) and her family were driven to move out of her community.⁵³ Police may take years to investigate, and the nearest police station may be several days' walk away. In addition, the general culture discourages women from reporting crime, sees their testimony as less valid than a man's, and that of a religious minority widow/ divorcee even lower in value, meaning many women do not attempt to seek justice for crimes committed against them. When they do, there is very little precedent for actual prosecution for almost any form of gender-based violence, despite laws existing to protect women from loss of inheritance or property, domestic violence, sexual abuse, early marriage, FGM or abduction.

The sense of honor and shame are strong in Ethiopian culture, and therefore women may keep attacks (in particular sexual or domestic violence) hidden from their own churches, and families and are extremely unlikely to report any violence or pressure to the local authorities for fear of shaming, hostility or further attacks and accusations (sometimes by authorities themselves). Proving that attacks are motivated by religion is even more difficult except where there is a clear pattern, but if women feel unable to speak about attacks (or are prevented from doing so), a pattern may not emerge.

There has been scarce reporting on violence against women generally and the gathering of relevant data by the Government has been minimal, preventing any real strategy for tackling the problem or bringing prosecutions.⁵⁴ In 2016, though, the Government launched a new Ethiopian Ethnographic Health Survey, which is intended to take place every five years, and will collect information on domestic violence (physical, emotional and sexual) and non-partner violence, including FGM. However, there remains a lack of grassroots awareness about reporting incidents and demanding justice: in rural areas particularly, women are left behind in terms of education which reduces their awareness of justice mechanisms and ability to seek redress for persecution. The general socio-economic factors in the country greatly contribute to this impunity.

When Christian women are too ashamed to report crimes against them, do not have the resources to bring a case against their attackers, are not listened to by authorities, they become an easy target for those who would undermine the wider Christian community.

⁵³ Open Doors Hong Kong, 28 July 2016.

⁵⁴ "Ethiopia Generates Its First National Data on Violence Against Women." *United Nations in Ethiopia*, 2016, available at: <http://et.one.un.org/content/unct/ethiopia/en/home/presscenter/news/ethiopia-generates-its-first-national-data-on-violence-against-w.html>.

5. Conclusion

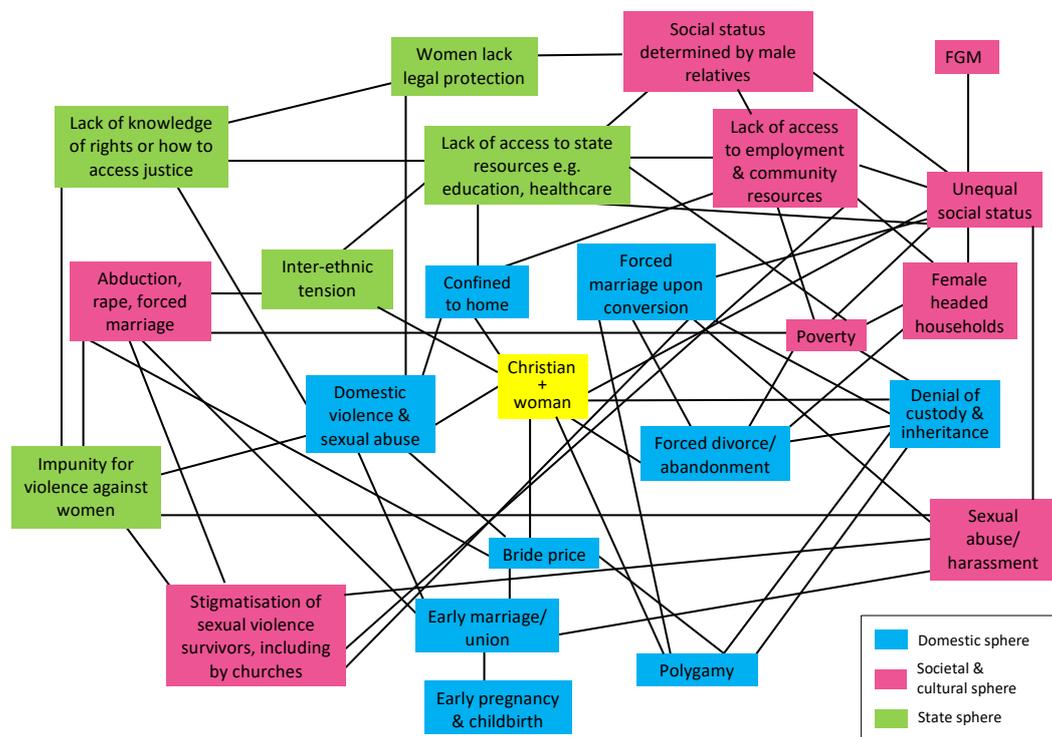


Figure 3: Intersecting vulnerabilities of women, and especially Christian women, in Ethiopia

As shown in Figure 3, the issues affecting women and girls are multi-layered and overlapping: one can see the complexity of linked issues around poverty, education, early marriage and childbirth, FGM and abduction, all of which impact girls before they even reach adulthood and have lifelong consequences. Each issue impacts, and sometimes causes, another one. It is impossible to separate one from the other, but taken together they build a picture of lifelong hardship for women: if all the women in a community live life under these conditions, and if they make up half of a congregation, it must necessarily undermine the Church as a whole, particularly when its own members perpetuate the violence and discrimination.

Cross-checking available data reveals that most forms of violence and harmful traditional practices against girls and women are present across all religions and denominations at both a national and *woreda* (district) level. UNICEF, for example, disaggregated 2007 national census data on child marriage and discovered that the top 'hot spot' for marriage amongst girls aged 10-14 was Jikawo, Gambela, where 43.8% of 10 to 14-year-old girls were married.⁵⁵ When we further cross-check this with other 2007 census data, we see that Jikawo is 84.11% Protestant, 4.48% Catholic and 1.71% Ethiopian Orthodox.⁵⁶ Moreover, young girls married in Jikawo are

⁵⁵ Jones et al, 2016, p.5.

⁵⁶ "Census 2007 Tables: Gambela Region." Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia, 2007, p.62. Archived 14 Nov. 2010 at the Wayback Machine: https://web.archive.org/web/20101114005224/http://www.csa.gov.et/index.php?option=com_rubberdoc&view=doc&id=270&format=raw&Itemid=521.

almost always withdrawn from school, their bride price used to secure their brothers' futures, and many become pregnant before they are 15.⁵⁷

Even when the Church and its members are not participating in or condoning discrimination and violence against women, it is important to understand the dangers facing female converts to Christianity who may experience this.

When persecution from any source is added to already-burdened women within a congregation, it vastly increases the Church's vulnerability and reduces its strength and ability to thrive. The Church, therefore, has a vital role to play in ending violence and discrimination against women and girls, for the sake of its own survival if not for the resilience and well-being of half its members.

⁵⁷ Jones et al, 2016, p.7.