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WWL 2021 Compilation of  
Pressure Points and GSRP profiles  
for countries ranking 1-74



**OpenDoors**

Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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# WWL 2021 Compilation of Pressure Points and GSRP profiles for countries ranking 1 - 74

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## Introductory note

This compilation presents a per-country look at the Pressure Points and Gender Profiles for the top 74 countries on Open Doors World Watch List 2021.<sup>1</sup> Gender-specific research persecution (GSRP) analysts conducted analysis on these 74 countries, utilizing existing qualitative information to draw out gender-specific forms of persecution for each country. GSRP analysts use the term ‘Pressure Points’ to describe these pressures. Detailed information on the nature of this research, as well as definitions for these 30 Pressure Points, are available in the GSRP Methodology.<sup>2</sup>

The results of this research formed the basis of the 2021 GSRP report *Same Faith, Different Persecution*, which presents global trends and findings.<sup>3</sup> To enhance country-specific understanding of GSRP, researchers further utilized the results to compose gender profiles for each of the 74 countries. These profiles are collated below, alongside the accompanying Pressure Points identified for each country, by gender.

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<sup>1</sup> WWL 2021 Compilation of all main documents, <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/WWL-2021-Compilation-of-main-documents-ODA-version.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> GSRP Methodology, <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/GSRP-Methodology-March-2021.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Brown E, Fisher H, Miller E, Morley, R: *Same Faith, Different Persecution*, 1 March 2021, <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/GSRP-Report—Same-Faith-Different-Persecution—March-2021.pdf>

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## 1) North Korea

### **Women:**

**Denied custody of children, Forced divorce, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Trafficking, Violence – physical, Violence – psychological, Violence – sexual.**

Many North Korean women who have defected to China have been subject to human trafficking. It is estimated that up to 80% of all defectors are women. Given the recent improvement of the North Korea-China relationship, cooperation between the North Korean intelligent agency and Chinese police has been strengthened. As a result, the numbers of repatriated North Korean women from China before the COVID-19 crisis is growing, and often the targets are women who have had contact with Christians and have tried to escape China to South Korea. Defectors suffer from the fear of forced repatriation and severe interrogations, including torture. Others may face a continuous cycle of violence and harassment from the Chinese who purchased them, and repeated trafficking.

Open Doors estimates that tens of thousands of DPRK Christians are in labor camps for their faith, where female criminals and prisoners suffer from sexual violence during the interrogation process and prison life. Sources indicate that rape is a daily occurrence inside the DPRK concentration camps. A [report](#)<sup>4</sup> on the human rights violations against women in the DPRK highlights that [rape and other sexual violence](#)<sup>5</sup> and torture in detention facilities of women is endemic, and guards are known to sexually abuse or exploit female prisoners (United Nations 2020 report, “Human rights violations against women detained in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea”). This sexual exploitation is enabled by a society which is culturally patriarchal; women are treated relatively poorly and are considered subservient to men. In the law on the protection of women and family law, the focus is on reconciliation rather than the prosecution of perpetrators of gender-based violence against women; it does not provide for victim protection and support measures or for criminal liability of perpetrators, creating a means of legal impunity for the use of domestic and sexual violence as a means of religious persecution.

Those from historically Christian families may be forcibly divorced from their husbands and denied custody of their children. Further, since 2014, it has become mandatory for females to go into military service, which is a notoriously controlling environment, opposed to all religious practice (although the length of service of around 5 years is shorter than for males).

In the harsh life of North Korea, where [28%](#)<sup>6</sup> of pregnant and lactating women are estimated to be undernourished, women are gaining increasing power in their household economy through their work in the town markets and are free from government-assigned work positions, unlike men (The Independent, 20th November 2017).

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/HR\\_Violations\\_against\\_Women\\_DPRK\\_EN.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/KP/HR_Violations_against_Women_DPRK_EN.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <https://kr.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/75/2017-Human-Rights-Report-DPRK.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/north-korea-latest-women-rape-sexual-violence-malnutrition-discrimination-un-human-rights-kim-jong-un-a8065291.html>

**Men:**

**Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via business/job/work access, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence – physical**

The patriarchal society of North Korea means that State monitoring and control over the population is especially focused on the male heads of the household. All male adults must belong to workplaces allocated by the government. They have to confirm their attendance at work and cannot stop working for any private reason. This is because the job allocation is a government system of controlling people. The increasingly shaky national ration distribution is also based on male head of household. Because of this system, the main actors at market places are mostly women.

The mandatory 10-year military conscription (starting at 17 for male youths) always forces the issue of whether someone has a connection to Christianity in their family history. If such a connection is found, then preferred forms of military service are disallowed. Likewise, those with an identifiable Christian connection are consigned to the lowest positions within universities and workplaces and are denied party membership.

Christian men also suffer maltreatment and physical abuse within the context of labor camps.

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## 2) Afghanistan

**Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence – death, Violence – physical, Violence – psychological, Violence – sexual, Violence – verbal.**

Although conversions usually happen together as a family unit in Afghanistan, when a woman decides to convert to Christianity on her own, she is likely to keep it a secret. The religious persecution of Christian women in Afghanistan is facilitated by the very weak role women play in Afghan society and their few rights to social protection. Reflecting this, Afghanistan ranks 166th out of 167 countries studied in Georgetown's [Women, Peace and Security Index \(2019/20\)](#)<sup>7</sup>. Women in Afghanistan in general are highly vulnerable to all forms of physical abuse and have very little financial social or financial autonomy.

In light of their lower social status, women who convert to the Christian faith are prone to even more pressure and harassment than men. Incarceration by family/house arrest is an invisible and acceptable means of putting a Christian woman under pressure, as is the threat to divorce her. Women can be sold into slavery or prostitution, beaten severely, or sexually mishandled. Due to

<sup>7</sup> <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>

Afghanistan's honor-shame culture, women are unlikely to report instances of rape or sexual abuse due to both the stigma attached, and the lack of legislative justice.

According to a country expert, forced marriages are commonplace in Afghanistan and "all marriages face an element of forced marriage." Forced marriages and rape are used as tools for forced re-conversion, particularly against women and girls from a Muslim background. A young female Christian convert can be forced to marry a non-Christian (often older) with relative ease. It is widely accepted that a husband may beat his wife; according to a UN report, [51%](#)<sup>8</sup> of women are affected by lifetime physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence (UN Women, Global Database on Violence against Women). Another [UN report](#)<sup>9</sup> states that the murder of women is the second most prevalent form of violence against women in Afghanistan (UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, "Injustice and Impunity, Mediation of Criminal Offences of Violence against Women", May 2018). There were 280 cases of murder and "honor killings" of women recorded from January 2016 to December 2017, including Christian female converts.

On the other hand, as conversions are kept as secret as possible and women are kept from social interaction as much as possible, women who do not fall prey to the abuse described above are more likely to be able to live their new-found faith out of view and even pass their faith on to husband and family members.

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Economic harassment via business/job/work access, Imprisonment by government, Violence – death, Violence – physical, Violence – psychological, Violence – verbal.**

Hardly anything is hidden in communal life; many men and boys face severe pressure and violence from their own families if their Christian faith is discovered. If one family member gets persecuted, it affects the others as well, as they are suspect by association with the convert.

Christian men face ridicule, imprisonment, torture leading to disabilities, threats, sexual abuse by peers and potentially death because of their faith. There is a tradition of abusing young boys in Afghanistan. Men and boys also become targets for militias seeking to coerce them into joining their fighter groups.

Male converts must often find alternative sources of income in order to avoid being exposed by not taking part in religious practices in the marketplace. If discovered, they will experience harsh discrimination from employment authorities. Since men are the economic providers in their household, families rely on them financially. If male converts are killed, female family members are forced to find work which can lead to abuse.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/en/countries/asia/afghanistan>

<sup>9</sup> [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama\\_ohchr\\_evaw\\_report\\_2018\\_injustice\\_and\\_impunity\\_29\\_may\\_2018.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_ohchr_evaw_report_2018_injustice_and_impunity_29_may_2018.pdf)

### 3) Somalia

#### Women:

**Abduction, Denied access to Christian religious materials, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied food or water, Discrimination/harassment via education, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced to flee town/country, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence – death, Violence – physical, Violence – psychological, Violence – sexual, Violence - verbal**

Women in Somalia, for the most part, lead prescribed lives with little leeway for personal belief or expression. A woman does not have a voice in her community and is dependent on men. Young female converts to Christianity remain one of the most vulnerable populations. It is common for a woman suspected of Christianity to be raped and humiliated in public, kept under strict house arrest, abducted, forcibly married to a radical sheikh or killed. If already married, she will likely be divorced and have her children taken away in order to ensure that, as one country expert explains, “they are raised well, in the Islamic way.”

Forced marriages are commonplace in Somalia; in 2020 the long-anticipated Sexual Offences Bill was [overturned](#)<sup>10</sup> by Parliament (Reuters, 11 Aug 2020). Instead of protecting women and girls from sexual abuse, rape and child marriage, the new legislation permitted child and early marriages to continue. As such, forced marriages – often to much older men – is easily accessible as a means of coercion to restore converts back to Islam. Some are pressured by their families, whilst others are abducted by radical Muslims for the purpose of forced conversion, marriage and sexual slavery. According to media [reports](#)<sup>11</sup>, abducting and marrying girls to militants is part of an organized program by al-Shabaab to breed its next generation of fighters (BBC News, 24 May 2017).

[Education](#)<sup>12</sup> is often brief for girls, with only 5% making it to high school enrolment (No Ceilings: The Full Participation Project, accessed 20 November 2020). In education, Christian girls can be pressured into attending Islamic *Duksi* classes and dressing in al-Shabaab compliant burkas. Additionally, by law women and girls can [inherit](#)<sup>13</sup> only half the amount of property to which their brothers are entitled (UNDP, 2019, “Somalia: Gender Justice and the Law” p.17). These factors contribute to the economic vulnerability of women, which is often exploited. Christian women also suffer when their husbands are imprisoned or killed; widows tend to be forced to marry Muslim men, property is confiscated and the widow is left at the mercy of the man's family. Many are taken advantage of by male relatives and young daughters married off. The family often ends up impoverished.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-somalia-women-rights/outrage-as-somali-parliament-drafts-law-permitting-child-forced-marriages-idUSKCN257200>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-40022953>

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.noceilings.org/child-marriage/?utm\\_source=CeilingBreakers&utm\\_medium=Web&utm\\_campaign=NoCeilings%22%20\|%20%22SOM%22%20\h%20HYPERLINK%20%22http://www.noceilings.org/child-marriage/?utm\\_source=CeilingBreakers&utm\\_medium=Web&utm\\_campaign=NoCeilings%22%20%5Cl%20%22SOM%22%20%5C#SOM](http://www.noceilings.org/child-marriage/?utm_source=CeilingBreakers&utm_medium=Web&utm_campaign=NoCeilings%22%20\|%20%22SOM%22%20\h%20HYPERLINK%20%22http://www.noceilings.org/child-marriage/?utm_source=CeilingBreakers&utm_medium=Web&utm_campaign=NoCeilings%22%20%5Cl%20%22SOM%22%20%5C#SOM)

<sup>13</sup> <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Somalia%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English.pdf>

**Men:**

**Abduction, Denied access to Christian religious materials, Enforced religious dress code, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence – physical.**

Somalia is a patriarchal society with high social control. Somali men and boys merely suspected of conversion to Christianity face extreme violations of their fundamental rights. They are at risk of being verbally abused, physically assaulted, have their businesses taken over, imprisoned, heavily threatened, tortured, abducted, or killed in abhorrent ways. These are no idle threats and fear is a constant companion for Somali Christian men and boys.

Men face more hostile treatment because they are perceived as leaders who ought to represent the Islamic faith; they are expected to lead their family in religious matters and can consequently be blamed if a family member converts. Leadership positions are stripped from them and they lose their wives and children. For those suspected of conversion themselves, pressure is applied on them to conform by their local community. For instance, they may be deliberately selected to lead the Mosque prayers and be expected to grow a beard, marry more than one wife or perform Islamic rituals in public. These are means of testing suspected converts.

Additionally, boys are expected to own and operate weapons, and many are abducted and indoctrinated by al-Shabaab. Families forcefully send their young men to Islamic rehabilitation centers to be trained as al-Shabaab militia, including converts. If exposed within this context as Christians, they face further dangers; as one country expert notes, “they are subject to manipulation by the ones who know their identity.”

If discovered, Christian men are also denied their inheritance and boys are denied education. For a Christian family, the whole family and community is affected if the husband is killed or compromised, for the man is the breadwinner. When the men are killed, their family is often left unprotected and labeled kaffirs: They will be seen as a dirty stain on the community. The underground church also suffers greatly when the men are persecuted or killed because most of the other men opt to go deeper underground, leading to leadership crises.

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## 4) Libya

**Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to Christian religious materials, Enforced religious dress code, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

Female Christians face the same pressures of persecution as men in many regards. However, as Libyan women tend to live secluded from other people and under strict familial control, the severity of their experience is greater. In general, women have a lower position within Libyan family life than men; this is caused by tribal norms corresponding to Sharia. It is extremely

challenging for female converts to access Christian religious materials or meet with other Christians. If suspected of being interested in Christianity, a woman can face house arrest, sexual assault, forced marriage or even a so-called 'honor killing.' It is difficult for female converts to escape such dangerous situations. There is almost no scope for them to live autonomously, since there is an explicit restriction on a woman becoming head of the household or family.

In light of Libya's honor-shame culture, all women and girls are expected to uphold high norms regarding their sexuality and dress modestly. It is widely understood that failing to do so brings shame upon the wider family. Christian women who experience sexual violence because of their faith, sometimes as a form of punishment, encounter social and cultural barriers to the prosecution of any offence. This includes police and judicial reluctance to act and family reluctance to publicize an assault, all of which contribute to a lack of effective government enforcement. A [woman's testimony](#)<sup>14</sup> does not carry the same evidentiary weight in court as a man's (World Bank Group, 2018, "Women, Business and the Law" p.107). This vulnerability is further compounded by the lack of adequate legislation on sexual harassment and domestic violence.

Another significant group in Libya are the Christian sub-Saharan migrant women and men attempting to cross Libya to reach Europe. Christian women are highly vulnerable to abduction and sexual enslavement, especially when they are separated from their male companions - such as in migrant detention centers.

**Men:**

**Abduction, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/ business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/ service against conscience, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

In general, men face higher risks of physical violence in Libya, due to an ongoing "cycle of violence, atrocities and impunity" according to an International Criminal Court [prosecutor](#)<sup>15</sup> (UN News, 6 November 2019). Christian men face loss of employment, physical and mental abuse, eviction from their family home, and kidnap for ransom. As the providers for their family, Christian men who lose their ability to provide as a result of persecution often feel that they have lost their role in the family, causing psychological distress. The risks for Libyan Christian men are so high that the formation of fellowship groups is nearly impossible unless whole families convert.

Forced labor and slavery are widespread for sub-Saharan men who have migrated to Libya, including Christian men. They are often young and travel without their family, which makes them vulnerable to being abducted for enforced heavy agricultural labor, especially when they run out of money. Others are abducted or arrested and are only freed if a ransom is paid. If the men have a family in their home country, those families will be financially at risk as they are expecting their husbands and fathers to protect them and take financial care of them.

<sup>14</sup> <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/926401524803880673/pdf/125804-PUB-REPLACEMENT-PUBLIC.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/11/1050771>

Libyan men and boys have been increasingly forced to fight in militias, causing more and more to flee their home towns to evade such a fate. Migrant Christians in detention camps, too, are forced to fight. They are, as a country expert explains, “forced to fight as combatants or provide support for the war efforts of the militias on both sides of the conflict.” Refusal to fight can be met with death.

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## 5) Pakistan

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced marriage, Targeted seduction, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Christian (and Hindu) girls and young women are particularly vulnerable in Pakistan. Christians report that their girls are often abducted, raped, forced to ‘marry’ their abductor, and converted by force. The ‘marriage’ is then used as a legal shelter acting as an exemption with regard to the young person’s status as a minor. In addition, such ‘marriages’ and ‘conversions’ are used to place the underage girls beyond other means of legal recourse available to their parents. This is a widely utilized and strategically targeted Pressure Point against minority faith communities. According to an expert the goal is: “to dishonor the Christian community, the Christian individual and to weaken the Church.” In addition to abduction, reports indicate that Christian girls have been seduced as a means of converting them to Islam.

According to a [report](#)<sup>16</sup> by the Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan, at least 1,000 girls belonging to Christian and Hindu communities are forced to marry Muslim men every year (Human Rights Watch, Pakistan: Events of 2018). Victims are normally between the ages of 12 and 15, such as recent victims [Arzoo](#)<sup>17</sup> (BBC News, 3 November 2020) and [Maira](#)<sup>18</sup> (Zenit, 30 July 2020).

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, and the authorities do not take any action. This is particularly the case for young Christian girls in Punjab province. Consequently, parents of victimized women and girls face fierce legal battles, and many feel it is pointless to take legal action. Even when a case comes to the courts, girls may be forced to testify that they converted voluntarily and face threats against them and their families. Further setting the stage for impunity of violence against Christian women is that, in general, a woman’s testimony in court does not carry the same weight as a man’s.

Once married, a woman has little protection against those who would punish her for maintaining her chosen religion. She may be physically beaten or even the victim of so-called ‘honor killings.’

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/pakistan>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-54789714>

<sup>18</sup> <https://zenit.org/2020/07/30/breakthrough-in-case-of-abducted-pakistani-girl/>

There have also been reports of the targeted trafficking of Christian girls for both bonded labor, where they are chained to their workplace, and a 'prostitution ring' smuggling Christian girls into China.

Being part of a Christian family does not protect women from religious freedom violations, either. She may be subject to false charges for breaking blasphemy laws, beaten and/or sexually harassed.

**Men:**

**Abduction, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Economic harassment via fines, False charges, Imprisonment by government, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Christian men face many forms of violence in Pakistan. Blasphemy laws continue to provide the structure for much of the rights violations of Christian men in Pakistan. There are hundreds of cases against them purporting blasphemy that all too often have their foundation in a tenancy or work dispute, or even a cricket match rivalry. Christian men live in constant fear of blasphemy allegations, false charges, destruction of their property, arrest, imprisonment, beatings, torture and execution. Exemplifying the dangers, in early 2020 a young Christian man died following a severe beating after his Muslim landowner accused him of polluting the water of his tube well. As an expert shares, these types of violations come from a culture of 'Christo-phobia' where men pay the price simply for being Christian in an Islamic world.

There are also reports of Christian boys being subject to sexual abuse. Experts indicate that instances of rape and murder of young boys are on the rise in Pakistan, including young Christians.

Christian men and boys are often 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 or sewage cleaners. Whereas there is also a Christian middle class and not all hold lower status jobs, discrimination and social inferiority are ubiquitous. Islamic law and practices promote an attitude of Muslim superiority in society; thus, Muslims are encouraged not to accept Christian men being in more senior positions to them in workplaces. This can translate into a lack of employment opportunities and discrimination after a job is found.

Christian men and boys are also trapped in cycles of bonded labor, such as in brick-kiln factories.

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## 6) Eritrea

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Discrimination/harassment via education, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Imprisonment by government, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Targeted Seduction, Trafficking, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

Female Christians are caught in a pincer of pressure from the Eritrean government and social pressures. Not only are Evangelicals and converts alike subject to increasing government persecution, but they experience the usual social and domestic pressures of belonging to an unacceptable minority. Converts face abduction within their community (including bridal abduction), incarceration in the home, forced marriage, forced divorce and loss of child custody, particularly in rural areas. If a female Christian is abducted by a Muslim and forcibly married, or lured into a romantic relationship by one, she will be forced to accept his religion as well. Forced marriage is a widely reported tool utilized against female converts in Eritrea.

While pressure is reportedly highest against converts both from a Muslim background and Eritrean Orthodox Church- families have also been known to look down on converts, isolating them within the home. While parents may appear to fulfill their parental responsibilities, paying school fees, clothing and housing them for example, they may ignore them entirely, causing psychological distress. In some situations, they could be expelled from home, shunned without any help.

Whereas in many countries women are exempt from military service, in Eritrea, women are also subjected to obligatory military training and national service at the infamous SAWA military training camps, a highly controlled environment in which every behavior and belief is scrutinized. [Female conscripts](#)<sup>19</sup> are vulnerable to various forms of gender-based violence, including from prisoner guards and commanders (Eritrea Hub, 15 January 2020, "No peace for Eritrea's long-suffering female conscripts"). Many choose to flee the country in order to evade such a fate.

Hundreds of women also experience gender-based violence within the context of detention centers. Eritrea's practice of indefinite detention has sparked fierce criticism; according to various reports there are hundreds of Christians detained at different detention centers for no reason other than being Christian. Many have been there for years.

Women detained or forced to escape the country are not the only victims. The families and children of such detainees and escapees will also be victims in that they will be denied the chance to see their loved ones, in addition to other punitive acts, simply for being a family member. In a similar vein, when men flee the country, or are killed or imprisoned for their faith, women are responsible for taking on family responsibilities in their absence. As men are typically the providers in Eritrea society, many families end up impoverished.

<sup>19</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/eritrea/empowerment-during-war-eritrean-women-must-fight-gender-discrimination-new-peace>

**Men:**

**Abduction, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/ service against conscience, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence – physical.**

As is the case for women, male Christians are subject to the system of obligatory military conscription, which places them in a highly controlled environment. As a result, many young Eritreans seek to escape the country. It was hoped that the peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia might change this compulsory situation, but two years on from the deal tensions between the countries [remain high](#)<sup>20</sup> (Institute for Security Studies, 11 September 2020).

Everyday life is under scrutiny; phone calls are monitored, bandwidth is kept slow and a network of citizens (usually women) are tasked with spying on their neighbors. Indeed, the level of monitoring has caused Eritrea to hold the infamous title of [“Africa’s North Korea”](#)<sup>21</sup> (The Economist, 14 August 2018). Those suffering the most are Christians who are not recognized by the state.

In Eritrea, there seems to be little difference in gender treatment as all who are found in secret cell group meetings suffer the same fate of arbitrary arrests and indefinite detention. Many are also 'released' into the forced military service after such arrests. The Pressure Points that are most specific to Christian men however are physical beatings, forced labor and killings.

Because most underground church leadership positions are held by men, any arrests among them causes a leadership vacuum. In cases where an arrested man is the breadwinner, his arrest causes economic distress to his family, an unstable childhood for his children and consistent fear. His children find they are often taunted by fellow children and branded as a 'Pente', a label which is deemed to be shameful across Eritrea.

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## 7) Yemen

**Women:**

**Denied access to Christian religious materials, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

Yemen is a strongly patriarchal society in which women enjoy few rights; women are expected to obey their fathers, brothers, uncles, and husbands. Yemeni women are entirely dependent on having a protective male in their lives, since there is [legislation](#)<sup>22</sup> designating head of household status to the man (World Bank Group, “Women, Business and the Law”, p.152). Conversion from Islam to Christianity is forbidden both in Islam and in Yemeni law. Within this patriarchal, Islamic context, a female converting to Christianity is considered a shameful act for the whole family.

<sup>20</sup> <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/the-eritrea-ethiopia-peace-deal-is-yet-to-show-dividends>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/08/14/why-eritrea-is-called-africas-north-korea>

<sup>22</sup> <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/926401524803880673/pdf/125804-PUB-REPLACEMENT-PUBLIC.pdf>

Converts from a Muslim background are most vulnerable. In a typical scenario, female converts will have their telephone and other means of communication taken away. Next, she might be isolated in the home, physically and mentally abused, and possibly given in marriage to a devout Muslim, raped or even killed to 'restore the honor' of the tribe or family.

Forced marriage to a strict non-Christian is a common solution to bring a young female convert into line. Yemeni legislation does not suitably address child marriage, domestic violence or marital rape. Women also face [unequal treatment in courts](#)<sup>23</sup>, where the testimony of a woman is given half the weight of a man's testimony (US Department of State, Yemen 2018 Human Rights Report, p.31). Legal omissions of protection can therefore be exploited for religious freedom violations of Christian women.

Furthermore, the family control of girls is the cultural norm in much of the country; although much less so in major cities such as Sana'a and Aden. For a Christian wife with a non-Christian husband, if families press for a divorce on account of the wife's faith, it is likely that the custody of any children will be granted to the husband or to other Muslim family-members regardless of the ages of the children. Ordinarily the mother would be granted custody until the age of puberty, but an over-riding factor will be the ability to provide an Islamic upbringing.

Women and girls have more limited access than men to information about the Christian faith and participation in a church group. Because families closely monitor the activities of female members of the household, their coming and going from the household and their telephones come under greater scrutiny (particularly as cell phones are often shared by family members), and it is often more difficult for a female convert to explore her faith and/or practice it with others. This results in fewer women and girls becoming Christians, being active in local churches and passing on their faith to their children.

**Men:**

**Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home/expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence – physical.**

Life in general in Yemen is tremendously difficult in an ongoing war with no religious freedom. The most common pressure for Yemeni male converts comes from family and community. Pressure varies in intensity according to the family hierarchy; it is most keenly felt by women and girls, followed by younger men, followed by older men (reflecting cultural levels of status and freedom).

War has separated family members and Christians and others cannot move about freely in the country. All males, including Christians, can be forced to join militias, if they are of military age. Boys as young as 10 are also recruited into [militias](#)<sup>24</sup> (AP News, 19 December 2018). When boys

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/YEMEN-2018.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> <https://apnews.com/082c0b7b6253468e97da5ee0c3f43066>

are dragged into the army and war, it affects their education and future - not just because of the amount of time it takes from their lives - but also because of the highly controlled Islamic environment in which training takes place.

Male converts to Christianity face a greater risk of losing their job, being beaten and being imprisoned by the local authorities. Whereas women are most likely to experience violations in the private sphere, men are more likely to experience challenges in the public sphere. If men are imprisoned, killed or lose their job, their families will experience significant financial hardship and become vulnerable to exploitation. Unemployed or imprisoned men may also struggle psychologically due to a loss of status in the community and the risk of being ostracized.

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## 8) Iran

### **Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Imprisonment by government, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

In Iran, women have little individual legal protection, making the situation particularly precarious for Christian women detained for their faith. According to some estimates, the majority of house-church members in Iran are women, as the domestic setting provides more opportunities for them to participate in ministry and leadership. Whilst this has allowed many women to fulfil their calling, it has also made them more vulnerable. They risk being arrested and sexually harassed by the authorities during interrogation and imprisonment. Shaming women in this way is an effective way to stain their reputation and harm their social status.

With many churches forced to shut down and Christians increasingly isolated, some Christian women, particularly Muslim background converts, are forced to marry Muslims. Pressure comes from their family, as well as the local community; a single Christian woman seeking employment will face discrimination and be viewed with disfavor in the marketplace. The legal minimum age of marriage for girls is 13, but girls as young as nine years old may be married [with permission](#)<sup>25</sup> from the court and their fathers (US Department of State, 2018, “Iran 2018 Human Rights Report”). If a female convert is an already-married mother, it is highly likely that the custody of the children will be taken from her in order to ensure the children are raised in an Islamic way. Converts may also be placed under house arrest and denied access to Christian community.

Within marriages Christian women are unprotected against sexual abuse and domestic violence; authorities consider such issues a private matter and legislative justice is lacking. There is an explicit restriction on a woman becoming the head of a household or the head of a family. While

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/IRAN-2018.pdf>

rape is illegal, a rape victim must present [four male eye witnesses](#)<sup>26</sup> and two female witnesses in order to prove the crime (ECOSOC, 2005, "Integration of the Human Rights of Women and a Gender Perspective: Violence Against Women" p.16).

This lack of legal protection against violence creates impunity for the violent religious persecution of Christian women in many situations, both in the private and public spheres. Since Iranian women are not free to travel on their own, fleeing a dangerous situation and finding sheltered accommodation becomes problematic.

At a most basic level, Iranian law provides that a woman who appears in public without appropriate Islamic attire may be [sentenced to flogging](#)<sup>27</sup> and being fined (Al-Jazeera, 2 February 2018). Female activists against the compulsory *hijab* have been sentenced to 12 and 15 years in prison ([VOA News, 21 November 2020](#)<sup>28</sup>, [Radio Farda, 28 August 2019](#)<sup>29</sup>).

**Men:**

**Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

Despite the majority of house-church members now being women, more men are arrested, prosecuted, sentenced by the government, and often imprisoned for many years. Male pastors in particular are affected. Men are more often arrested in urban areas, whereas in rural areas they are forced to flee the town. Lengthy imprisonments have had a familial cost; sometimes the strain and emotional pain caused by separation leads to divorce and child trauma. The child of one pastor could not address him as "dad" upon his recent release, instead calling him "sir."

Men are usually the primary providers for their families, especially if they have young children. When converting to Christianity, men risk losing their jobs, particularly if they have been arrested. If they apply for a business registration or trade permit and the officer discovers their Christian faith, the application is likely to be turned down. This puts extra financial and psychological pressure on the families. Younger converts may be banned from continuing with their education upon discovery of their faith.

When single Christian men are under acute stress through monitoring, threats and harassment, they are likely to flee the country, which naturally impacts the family emotionally and financially. In contrast to women, men are not seen as "misguided," but as willfully making wrong choices. Thus, their punishment is harsher, and they are more likely to suffer physical abuse, torture and longer prison sentences. Many are forced to migrate to the West, which weakens the Church, depriving it of experienced and mature male leaders.

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<sup>26</sup> <http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/-/media/files/un%20women/vaw/country%20report/asia/iran%20islamic%20republic%20of/iran%20the%20islamic%20republic%20of%20srvas.pdf?vs=4541>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/2/2/iran-arrests-29-women-for-not-wearing-hijab-in-protests>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/iranian-anti-hijab-activist-could-face-12-years-prison-if-deported-turkey>

<sup>29</sup> <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/anti-hijab-activist-in-iran-sentenced-to-15-years-in-prison/30133081.html>

## 9) Nigeria

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied custody of children, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Enforced religious dress code, Forced marriage, Forced to flee town/country, Targeted seduction, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

In the North of Nigeria, and increasingly also in the South, the gender component of the attacks and suffering of Christian women and girls continues to be dire. Raids by Boko Haram and its split off ISWAP, Fulani militants and armed bandits have terrorized Christian communities. Women and girls have been raped, forced into sexual slavery, kidnapped for ransom and killed. There is a general practice of treating women as inferior to men, in rural regions especially, which makes it easier for them to be maltreated.

Abduction is a Pressure Point used regularly and as a tactic to depopulate Christian-dominated territory, particularly in the North. Most commonly it is Christian girls who are abducted for the purpose of forced marriage and forced conversion – even women who are already married. The label of ‘marriage’ in such situations is used to mask and defend the actual slavery that is happening. According to a country expert, cases such as these are “spreading like wildfire.” When parents try to rescue their child, they commonly face resistance from the community, police and judges, who argue that the marriage is legitimate under Islamic law and the girls have accepted Islam. In addition to being ‘married’ off, girls abducted by militants have reportedly been used as suicide bombers or as fighters.

The fear that something will happen with their Christian daughters causes many Christian parents to have them married early as a kind of ‘protection.’ This, alongside laws permitting under-age marriage in some states, results in a particularly high early marriage rate for Christian girls. Some Christian parents also choose to keep their girls at home, due to the dangers facing girls travelling to school; this compounds the dependency of women and girls on men and fosters illiteracy in regards to their rights. Furthermore, the abduction of Christian girls, such as the Chibok girls in Borno state, has led to parents sending their daughters to schools in safer states. Those remaining in schools in northern states are forced to wear the Islamic code uniform.

When women are raped, their husbands can sometimes find it difficult to move past the trauma – they may even view their wife as tarnished, particularly if they have become pregnant; many homes have broken up because of this. When girls are abducted, a deep sadness falls upon the family. Men often see it as their fault for not protecting their children adequately. The victims themselves, too, carry scars and trauma for a very long time. As a country expert explains: “Their self-worth is damaged, very few actually come out of that trauma. Communities don’t usually help this issue as many stigmatize rape victims.” Christian communities therefore end up deeply fractured. The high rate of killings of Christian men also causes many dependent wives and children to fall into poverty, or flee for safety.

The general perception of the Hausa ethnic group is that women are not supposed to work outside the home or fend for themselves. Increasing poverty can make them vulnerable to pressure from perpetrators of violations and they can fall into all sorts of problems in an effort to survive. In addition to the great emotional toll and social cost of such violations, in some communities where widows are the main breadwinners of the family, violations against women also affects the economic well-being of the community.

**Men:**

**Abduction, Denied inheritance or possessions, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

In the North of Nigeria, and increasingly also in the South, with Boko Haram, ISWAP, Fulani militants and armed bandits, Christian men and boys are often specifically targeted and killed. Much of this violence happens by attacks on Christian communities in rural areas and at road blocks. These killings not only serve to eliminate the current generation of men and boys, but also guarantees that the birthrate of Christian families will fall considerably.

Among those who survive such attacks, many face abduction and forced inclusion in militant ranks. Young boys risk being recruited as child soldiers, and there are reports of church leaders and church members being regularly abducted for ransom. Discrimination against Christians has also been reported within the government armed forces, with Christian soldiers being posted to the most dangerous areas where many are killed by Boko Haram or other Islamic militant assailants.

Christian men and boys have also been strategically marginalized in terms of employment and education. They are unlikely to gain employment within the Federal Civil Service, even if highly qualified, and are increasingly excluded from gaining admission to schools or universities. The ensuing frustration causes many young men to leave the country in search of better opportunities.

The combination of these pressures has a devastating effect on the Church and Christian families. If a man is killed, loses his ability to work or has his property seized, his family can become impoverished. The vulnerability of the family is a living testimony of the overwhelming power of the perpetrators. This is particularly evident in the way that the perpetrators are almost never brought to justice.

Violence against women is also used as a weapon to harm Christian men. Men and boys have been forced to watch their wives, mothers, daughters and sisters be raped and killed in front of them, or abducted, causing deep trauma and feelings of helplessness, as they feel they should have been able to protect them.

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## 10) India

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied communal resources, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

India is a religiously diverse and democratic society whose national Constitution provides legal equality for all citizens irrespective of their religion, sex, race or caste, and prohibits religion-based discrimination. However, the reality is far different; other simultaneously existing laws uphold ancient traditions, which are by nature patriarchal and exploitative of weaker classes of society.

Women and girls are expected to be meek and emotional subjects, so persecution of Christian women and girls is often targeted at their body through molestation, rape and other forms of sexual harassment. As a country expert explained, rape is used as a weapon to “settle scores.” Daughters, sisters and wives of pastors are particularly vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse, and verbal slurs. Sexual attacks serve to shame the family; this can add psychological abuse for women and girls, as her sexual purity connotes the honor and prestige of her family. Girls are especially vulnerable; according to a World Vision India [survey](#)<sup>30</sup>, one in two children between the ages of 12 and 18 is a victim of sexual abuse (Hindustan Times, 16 May 2017).

For those in Christian communities, young Christian women in tribal areas may be subjected to sexual predation of various forms, with targeted trafficking reported.

Physical attacks on Christian women have included acid attacks, brutal beatings and killings.

First generation Christian women risk incarceration by their family and local community, forced marriage, forced divorce and being abandoned or expelled from their home or village. Social discrimination is widely utilized as a means of isolating and pressuring converts; they are banned from social life as well as communal resources, such as drinking water.

Women from the lower strata have always been exploited by high caste Hindus who mostly adhere to RSS’s ideology today. Many women from this lower caste community have turned to Christianity; this makes them a double target - for being Dalit and now Christian. As a country expert stated: “India's patriarchal society is possibly a worse enemy of women than religious bigotry. Together, the two make a fatal cocktail.”

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/one-in-every-two-children-victim-of-sexual-abuse-says-survey/story-spc4MsZTJsmjyrITZJep7L.html>

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied communal resources, Denied food or water, Denied inheritance of possessions, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Economic harassment via fines, False charges, Forced out of home – expulsion, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Despite legal protection, Christian men who are discovered talking about Christianity or choosing to adhere to the Christian faith are likely to be subjected to violence in many forms. Men and boys are seen as physically strong, and so the persecution of Christian men targets their physical strength as well as their position as decision-maker in the family and head of the household (if older). Violations against men includes various forms of beating, killings and emotional torture such as being forced to watch torture carried out on family members. Church leaders are particularly vulnerable; being a pastor continues to be understood to be one of the riskiest vocations in the country today. Hindu radicals target them and their families in order to set an example to the wider Christian community. Fear grows with each attack.

Another prevalent and effective form of discrimination in India is social exclusion. Men and boys may be socially isolated by their community and family, excluded from taking seats in councils or accessing government schemes and benefits, verbally harassed and possibly forced to leave the village. Upon discovery of their faith, they may lose their job, be transferred to faraway places, be given increasing workloads, face client boycotts and be compelled to participate in Hindu worship practices. Such pressures in the workplace have, according to a country expert, been getting worse over the past five years. Economic deprivation also takes the form of denial of legal inheritance for converts, and unjust fines. As men are the main providers this can throw the whole family into poverty.

False charges are often brought against men, such as accusations of attempting to convert Hindus, molestation or rape of women, or denigrating Hindu gods and goddesses. These charges are usually brought against pastors and preachers. Imprisonment of Christians carries a stigma which falls on their family as well.

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## 11) Iraq

**Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Targeted seduction, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

After years of violence, peace remains uncertain in Iraq. During the war against IS, IS was known for its atrocious treatment of women, especially using those from religious minorities for sexual

enslavement. However, [no IS member](#)<sup>31</sup> has been prosecuted or convicted for these crimes against women (Human Rights Watch, “Iraq: Events of 2019”). Women have few legal protections to protect them from gender-based violence and due to social stigma and retribution against both the victim and perpetrator, victims of sexual crimes do not usually report them to authorities. Rape victims – who can be forced to marry their rapist under Iraqi law – often choose not to report incidents of assault to avoid such a fate.

In some areas, Christian women and girls choose to wear veils (as Islamic women do) for their own safety. Unveiled women in Baghdad and Basra are likely to be harassed or even pelted with stones. For Christian women, this is compounded by the fact there is general impunity for violations against Christians, be it stealing property, kidnapping, sexual abuse or corruption. Often, when the perpetrator has higher connections and higher status, they will win the case, especially under the tribal justice system which can override national justice.

Female converts from Islam are most vulnerable to violations of their fundamental rights for their faith. Pressure comes most often from the wider family. A convert risks abuse in the form of house arrest, beatings, sexual harassment, rape and even being killed to restore the ‘honor’ to the family. “Several girls have been killed,” a country expert explained, “although this never reaches the news.” A female convert might also be divorced by her husband and lose custody of her children; while both male and female converts risk being divorced by their non-believing spouse, Iraqi divorce laws make women more vulnerable as they have fewer legal rights.

If single, a female convert may be forcibly married to a conservative Muslim. The attitude of the spouse’s family is crucial in this issue. Further adding challenges, female converts from Islam cannot officially marry male Christians, as the Iraqi state still considers them to be Muslims; Muslim women are not allowed to marry non-Muslims.

Single Christian girls without convert background have also been reportedly ‘lured’ by Muslim men, who then harass them and force them into marriage. On a community level, in state schools, Christian girls are seen as weaker and are often ridiculed for their faith. They are reportedly under pressure to convert to Islam and their grades can be impacted if they openly challenge concepts which contradict their Christian faith, or simply because the teacher does not want to give higher grades to a Christian over a Muslim. They are also viewed as being women who are loose and free because they attend parties and do not wear Islamic clothing. As a country expert explained: “This is because people interpret the Christian religion as meaning: I’m free to do what I like.” Women have reported that they have suffered sexual harassment and vulgar threats because of this perception. In one instance, a young Muslim man took pictures of Christian girls without their permission. When asked why he did so without consent, he replied: “They are Christian girls, and I have the right to do anything with them.”

In conclusion, Christian women – especially converts from Islam - suffer from unequal treatment in all sectors of society.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/iraq#0ed443>

**Men:**

**Abduction, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home/expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Violence - death, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Christian men are at risk of being targets for various forms of violence; particularly former Muslims are in a very vulnerable position and struggle to sustain their families. Job discrimination affects men belonging to all WWL categories of Christian communities, especially those working in the public sector. Christians in central and south Iraq have been put under pressure to leave their jobs, especially if they are working for foreign organizations or are employed at higher levels of society (e.g. government companies). In the north, Christians often struggle to get employment and allegedly feel vulnerable and prone to exploitation at their workplaces. Christian business owners also face discrimination, causing many to emigrate. In Mosul and Baghdad, they cannot start a business unless a Muslim associate is involved, and they may have their business boycotted if their faith is discovered.

In this mostly traditional and tribal Iraqi society, men are often the primary breadwinners for their families and losing their jobs can have a considerable effect on Christian families. The consequences of this can be far-reaching for their families, who apart from being left without income, often face emotional trauma if the man flees or is killed.

Male converts from a Muslim background are particularly vulnerable to violations. In a culture where retaining honor is everything, they risk being ejected from their families, threatened or killed. Men from a non-Muslim Christian background also risk being killed for their faith, the perpetrators being mostly violent Islamic militants.

These factors greatly increase the already strong motivations for emigration. The loss of Christian men not only affects their direct families, but also the local churches which consequently find themselves confronted with a lack of potential leadership. Further weakening the church, priests are sometimes targeted if they speak out against armed groups, or are occasionally kidnapped by jihadists.

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## 12) Syria

**Women:**

**Abduction, Denied custody of children, Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological.**

According to an August 2020 report by the [United States Institute of Peace](#)<sup>32</sup> (USIP): "Now in its 10th year, the Syrian conflict has led to more than 500,000 deaths and displaced an estimated 13

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.usip.org/index.php/publications/2020/08/current-situation-syria>

million—over half of Syria’s pre-war population. Over 6.2 million Syrians are internally displaced, and 5.6 million are refugees, predominantly in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey" (USIP, 26 August 2020). In a context of instability and restrictions on religious freedom, women and girls from religious minority groups, including Christians, risk abduction, sexual harassment and rape. Whilst the rate of instances has dropped dramatically since IS dominated areas of Syria, this can happen both in government-controlled areas and in rebel-held territory - though the threat is higher in the latter. Although there were also some reports of sexual violence against men and boys, in a situation in which sexual violence against women became increasingly normalized through Islamists re-introduction of female slavery, women remain much more affected by such violent acts.

Rape is used to bring shame upon Christian families and destabilize communities. The brutal gang-rape and murder of Suzan, a 60-year-old Armenian Christian, in July 2019, [reported](#)<sup>33</sup> by International Christian Concern, is a recent religiously motivated example. Most of the women from Suzan’s predominately Christian village have [reportedly](#)<sup>34</sup> since left due to the violent aggression of the radical groups, reflecting the ongoing dangers facing Christian women (Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 1 Aug 2019). Cases of women fleeing however, are rare.

Not only Islamic militant groups constitute a threat for Christian women and girls. For female converts, violence can come from their own families and communities, particularly those from a Muslim background. Such pressure affects women and girl converts most, then younger men and lastly older men, reflecting the levels of status and freedom generally within Islamic culture. Leaving Islam is a great taboo and seriously violates family honor. Women are, as a country expert described, a “soft target.” They may face domestic violence, forced marriage to a Muslim, or even be killed to restore the honor of the family. There is little protection from family violence for women and girls, either [in law](#)<sup>35</sup> or practice (UNDP, “Syria: Gender Justice and the Law”, 2018).

Female Christian converts married to a Muslim risk divorce, particularly if their conversion becomes known to in-laws. In this instance they would also be denied custody over their children since Sharia law dictates that rights are given to the Muslim party. Christian women married to male Christians of Muslim background also face challenges, as the law considers him to still be a Muslim. It is extremely difficult for them to raise their children as Christians, and should the husband die, the Christian wife would be entitled to no inheritance unless she converted to Islam. According to Sharia law, a Muslim woman is not allowed to legally marry a Christian man (vice versa is possible). This makes a marriage between a female Christian of Muslim background and a man from other categories of Christian communities legally impossible.

**Men:**

**Abduction, Denied inheritance or possessions, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.persecution.org/2019/07/17/christian-woman-stoned-death-syria/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.persecution.org/2019/07/17/christian-woman-stoned-death-syria/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Syria%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English.pdf>

According to [World Politics Review](#)<sup>36</sup> (WPR): “The Syrian civil war that has decimated the country for nine years now, provoking a regional humanitarian crisis and drawing in actors ranging from the United States to Russia, appears to be drawing inexorably to a conclusion...The fighting is not yet fully over, though, with the northwestern Idlib region remaining outside of government control” (WPR, 23 November 2020). Within this context, a common fear among indigenous Christians – and also among many other Syrian communities - is that young men will be forcibly conscripted into the Syrian Army or to other military factions (including the armed wing of the Kurdish Democratic Union Party referred to as People’s Protection Units or YPG). In Syria there is enforced military service for all men at the age of 18. Within opposition-held areas there may also be a general pressure to join defense forces or other armed units. Some Christians are conscientious objectors, and this can prompt consideration for emigration.

Violations against Christian men affects their families considerably, particularly if they are killed or abducted. In Syria’s traditional society, males are the main providers and support their families financially. If they lose their jobs or are abducted/killed, the whole family is dependent on external financial support to survive. Male converts from Islam face additional forms of freedom of religion violations and may be threatened by their family or denied their due inheritance.

The abduction of male church leaders continues to have a considerable negative impact on Christian communities. In November 2019, a Catholic priest and his father were targeted and killed by IS whilst on their way to check on church restoration in Deir al Zor. Christian leaders of Historical church communities are most at risk for these kind of attacks, as they are recognizable to extremists by their dress. There have been several examples of many others in a community leaving once a leader emigrates, which shows the impact such leaders can have on their churches and towns.

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## 13) Sudan

### Women:

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied inheritance or possessions, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced to flee town/country, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Under the transitional government there have been positive changes impacting women’s rights and safety in 2020. In July, it was announced that the apostasy law would be eliminated (which prohibited anyone converting from Islam to a different religion), that women would no longer require a permit from a male relative to travel, and that FGM would be banned (Human Rights Watch, 16 July 2020). In September, it was then [announced](#)<sup>37</sup> that Sudan’s transitional government had agreed to separate religion from the state, ending 30 years of Islamic rule in the

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/28041/the-syria-civil-war-might-be-ending-but-the-crisis-will-live-on#:~:text=The%20Syrian%20civil%20war%20that%20has%20decimated%20the,appears%20to%20be%20drawing%20inexorably%20to%20a%20conclusion.>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-04/sudan-ends-30-years-of-islamic-law-by-separating-religion-state>

nation (Bloomberg, 4 September 2020). Notwithstanding these positive developments, female Christians continue to face tremendous challenges and are at a disadvantage in society simply because of their gender. Continuing gaps in protective legislation remain avenues for religious persecution.

Christian women and girls, particularly converts, are vulnerable to rape, forced marriage and domestic violence. As a country expert explained, forced marriage can be used to “silence young Muslim background believers.” On a broader level, Islamic extremists have reportedly kidnapped Sudanese girls for marriage and/or sexual slavery. Converts may also be isolated within the home to reduce the embarrassment and shame of the conversion on the family, as well as to ensure they cannot meet with other Christians. Converts will also be denied inheritance and if already married, divorced from their husbands.

It is challenging for women and girls to report sexual crimes and domestic violence to the authorities, in part as the testimony of women is not considered equivalent to that of men, and there is significant social stigma attached to rape so many choose not to come forward. Additionally, it has been reported that policemen themselves have raped Christian girls. According to one expert, a security intelligence officer was “proudly speaking about Christian girls he had raped.” This feeds into a landscape of impunity for perpetrators. Women play a major role in raising their children, representing the family at societal events and helping their husbands with agricultural tasks. The persecution of women and girls therefore has a rippling negative impact on the wider family and community.

**Men:**

**Abduction, Economic harassment via work/job/business, False charges, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence – physical.**

Violent Islamic militancy continues to plague many African nations and has led to an increase in the persecution of Christians. Men and boys remain targets of forced recruitment into these militias, where they are forced to fight. The government of Sudan targets male Christians with a variety of serious false charges, including 'terrorism.' Reports also indicate that drugs have been planted in the bags of Christians for police to find. Church leaders are the most frequent targets and government security forces monitor their activities daily.

Christian men and boys, particularly converts, are vulnerable to beatings, imprisonment, killing, harassment within the workplace and displacement. Converts may be kicked out of their house and shunned by their families. Others feel forced to leave their home due to the pressure of persecution.

Men are usually the head of households and providers of the family. If they are unable to provide for their families due to persecution, the family will experience trouble financially. In addition, in remote parts of the country, men are important to their families for providing security; absence can lead to family property being looted and wife and daughters being sexually attacked.

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## 14) Saudi Arabia

### **Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied/restricted healthcare, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

In Saudi Arabia, the official religion and law is Islamic, and [all citizens are expected to be Muslims](#)<sup>38</sup> (US Department of State, 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Saudi Arabia). It is the country that, according to Georgetown, “retains its dubious status as the country with the most extensive legal discrimination against women” (Georgetown, “Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20, p.39). Women are subordinate to men, and under constant monitoring.

Leaving Islam is one of the biggest sins a Muslim can commit; female Christians with a Muslim background are exposed to considerable pressure sparked by their faith but compounded by their gender. For Saudi female converts from Islam, pressure is most commonly exerted by family and community. Upon discovery of their conversion, they risk physical violence, verbal harassment, and being forcibly married to conservative Muslims as a ‘corrective’ measure (sometimes as a second wife). Within such marriages, women are likely to suffer from sexual and psychological abuse. Whilst boys are more likely to be expelled from the home, girls are more likely to be locked in under strict house arrest, have their phones removed and be isolated from the outside world. Converts who are already married risk being divorced and losing custody of their children.

Outside the context of marriages, sources report that instances of rape and sexual assault are commonplace across Saudi Arabia for the thousands of non-Saudi (especially Asian and African) house maids across the country who are Christian (or non-Islamic), a position in which they are commonly abused and virtually treated as slaves. This reflects the subordinate position of women in Saudi society and their unprotected status when on their own (e.g. when working outside their home).

Given these pressures - and the ultimate threat of honor killings - it comes as no surprise that many women choose to become secret believers. Fleeing is rarely an option, as despite [2019 legislation](#)<sup>39</sup> allowing women to travel without a chaperone, the movement of women remains heavily controlled by men who can easily withhold her money and possessions (HRW, 22 August 2019).

In some instances, the low status of women in Saudi society can result in an easing of pressures compared to men. As a country expert explained: “Women are already oppressed and often disregarded as unimportant. This could lead to more freedom and less persecution simply because the family doesn’t care. Some families will let it go simply because the woman isn’t valuable.” This however compounds psychological trauma and feelings of isolation and rejection.

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/saudi-arabia/%22%20/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/08/22/saudi-arabia-travel-restrictions-saudi-women-lifted>

**Men:**

**Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Imprisonment by government, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

The male-dominated nature of public society in Saudi means that Saudi Christian men pay a considerable price if their faith becomes known. Saudi Arabia's strict Islamic society means that any deviation from standard behavior is quickly observed. A country expert observed: "They will lose everything - life, family, reputation, position as a son, job, and financial support."

Male converts face pressure from their family unit, as well as from wider society. They risk being publicly shamed, beaten, imprisoned, thrown out of their home, emotionally abused and threatened. They may be denied financial support, then offered material incentives to return to Islam and revoke the shame brought upon the family. Alternatively, they might be taken to a Sheikh who will pressure them to recant. If it becomes clear that a convert will not change, however, the threat of death is all too tangible.

Compounding the psychological trauma, families commonly cover up why they are mistreating their male family member. A country expert explained that one Christian "was disowned by his family who then lied to others about why [he was disowned] which further shamed him. They even posted lies about him on social media."

If converts are detained or imprisoned, their families will be affected by such absence on an economic level, since men are by and large the providers in Saudi families. In light of these pressures and the potentially crippling impact they could have on their families, most converts choose to live as secret believers. This extends as far as not even telling their own children about their faith, for fear that extended family members or school staff could discover that they have left Islam.

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## 15) Maldives

**Women:**

**Enforced religious dress code, Forced marriage, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Given the extremely strict interpretation of Islam in the Maldives, Christian men and women must be secret believers. If a Christian woman or girl is discovered to be a Christian, every effort will be made to bring her back to Islam through forced marriage, verbal abuse, threats or other forms of violence. NGOs have [reported](#)<sup>40</sup> ongoing community pressure on women to wear Islamic clothing and harassment of women who choose not to do so (US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report, Maldives 2019). As such they have little choice but to conform.

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/MALDIVES-2019-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>

Despite the closely-knit social control on the islands, abuse, rape and sexual harassment are surprisingly common in a culture that generally excuses gender-based violence within the home. According to a country expert, "sexual abuse and child abuse is rising as well as domestic violence." This observation is supported by [reports](#)<sup>41</sup>, which further note that the COVID-19 lockdown has been a contributing factor to a spike in violence (The Edition, 29 October 2020). Sexual and physical abuse are used as tools of religious persecution against Christian women.

**Men:**

**Imprisonment by government, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Being a Christian in the Maldives is so dangerous for both men and women that husbands, wives and children may not even know of each other's faith. The inability to meet as a community creates instability in the family and lack of access to Christian support, mentoring and training. If a Maldivian is found to be a secret Christian believer, he is likely to face bodily harm, harassment, threats, government imprisonment. Whilst there have been no reported cases in the past year, the threat of abduction is also tangible. In light of these pressures many choose to leave the country and go abroad, if they can afford to do so. If imprisoned the wider family will suffer financially and emotionally, and children are likely to be bullied at school.

Expatriate Christians also experience strong limitations in their day to day life, as well as feeling the emotional strain of those suffering around them.

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## 16) Egypt

**Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Enforced religious dress code, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Targeted seduction, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

There have been [numerous reports](#)<sup>42</sup> that Christian women are targeted for marriage by abduction, rape and forced conversion by Islamist networks, mainly in rural areas, villages and southern towns (Coptic Solidarity, 2020, "Jihad of the Womb - Trafficking of Coptic Women and Girls in Egypt"). Police response has been often complicit or apathetic and many women remain missing. The psychological toll is high, and many women live in fear, especially in rural areas. They feel as though they cannot leave the house by themselves and that they constantly need male company for protection. There are also reports that Christian girls are lured into marriage; these girls are often under-age and come from vulnerable families. Traditional practices do not help in this regard: Early marriage is part of the [norm](#)<sup>43</sup> in more rural and traditional societies

<sup>41</sup> <https://edition.mv/news/20068>

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/jihad-of-the-womb-report-fa.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> <https://egyptindependent.com/child-marriage-in-egypt-reaches-117000-children-capmas/>

(Egypt Independent, 21 November 2018). Older married Christian women whose husbands regularly work away have also been targeted. “Muslims know about these lonely women” a country expert explained, “and use their need for love, financial need, and lack of awareness to get into a relationship with these women then convert them to Islam.” This also serves to devastate their husbands.

Female converts from Islam are most vulnerable to freedom of religion violations. They may be isolated and locked in the home, physically beaten, tortured or even killed to defend the family honor. If married, they will very likely be divorced by their Muslim husbands, leaving them without any financial support. The custody of their children may be taken from them, as well as inheritance rights, although an important [legal case](#)<sup>44</sup> in 2019 may diminish scope for this abuse in future years (The Times, 27 November 2019).

Egypt has had a reputation for having relatively high rates of sexual harassment and violence within the Middle East. Due to international pressure and internal activists, there have been some [improvements](#)<sup>45</sup> in protection for those reporting sexual abuse (Reuters, 16 August 2020). Official statistics for past years are lacking, in part because women and girls refrain from reporting incidents [out of fear](#)<sup>46</sup> of retaliation and the stigma attached to sexual abuse (Library of Congress, accessed 2 December 2020). Giving some indication of a baseline from which these improvements have come, a 2013 survey (UN Women, “Study on Ways and Methods to Eliminate Sexual Harassment in Egypt,” p.6), reported that over 99% of women in Egypt have experienced sexual harassment, regardless of what they wear or what their religion is.

**Men: Abduction, Economic harassment via work/job/business, False charges, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

Christians in Egypt often feel they are being treated as second class citizens in a Muslim-majority country. Exemplifying this, the number of Christian in senior military or Government positions is minimal. Unemployment is a great pressure on men throughout the country, but especially in Upper Egypt. Particularly in rural areas, it is hard for Christian young men to find a job. In one town, a Christian man started a business selling desserts. In response a Muslim started selling the same product and told other Muslims not to buy from the man, because he was a Christian. His business consequently failed. Further exemplifying economic discrimination, Christian men can experience discrimination simply due to their conspicuously Christian names. According to [Coptic Solidarity](#)<sup>47</sup> (9 September 2019), of 540 players playing in top level clubs in 2019, only one was a Copt, despite Copts making up 10% of the Egyptian population. As the main financial provider, this hinders a Christian man’s ability to provide and impacts his self-confidence, which in turn affects his family. The strain of these dynamics has reportedly caused higher rates of

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/woman-overturms-arab-inheritance-rules-jcv3g2qr9>

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-women-metoo/egypt-approves-law-to-protect-identities-of-women-reporting-sex-abuse-idUSKCN25C0SC>

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/sexual-violence-against-women/egypt.php>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.copticsolidarity.org/2019/09/08/coptic-solidarity-urges-fifa-and-the-egyptian-football-association-to-end-discrimination-against-coptic-athletes/>

domestic violence and divorce. Perpetrators have also used these financial difficulties to convert younger men to Islam, luring them with financial incentives.

There were ongoing reports of abductions of men in the WWL 2021 reporting period, most of whom were kidnapped for ransom. Church leaders - most of whom are male - are particularly vulnerable to rights violations, in part as they are easily identifiable as Christians. The killing of clergy evokes feelings of fear and helplessness in the Christian community and leads to a spike in emigration. Those who speak out against injustices are also targeted. In November 2019, Ramy Kamel, a Christian journalist and activist was arrested for his continued reporting on violence and discrimination against Christians in Egypt. He has since been charged for "joining a terrorist organization" and "spreading false news."

Social media can also trigger physical violence and arrest. In August of 2020 a 65-year-old Christian was arrested and jailed for a 'blasphemous' post on Facebook. Coptic activists and researchers have also been arrested for "undermining social order."

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## 17) China

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Forced marriage, Imprisonment by government, Trafficking, Violence – sexual.**

Christian leaders are a target in China. Since many churches, especially house churches, are led by women, women are similarly affected by persecution, discrimination and intolerance as men. Whilst they are at equal risk of being imprisoned compared to men, they face the additional threat of being raped whilst in prison by police officers. A culture of impunity means assaults regularly go unpunished.

Generally speaking, converts from Muslim and Buddhist backgrounds face the greatest pressures; they may be abducted or forcibly married as a means of restoring them to their former faith.

China's one-child policy is notorious for leaving a gender imbalance. The consequences of this policy are interacting with the vulnerability of Christian communities in neighboring countries. Female Christians from Pakistan and Myanmar caught in China's network of trafficking may be sold as brides.

### **Men:**

**Abduction, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence – physical.**

Similar to the situation facing Christian women, male Christian leaders are generally the main target of government surveillance. Catholic priests and high-profile house church leaders have been abducted. "They are simply snatched away," a country expert explains, "only to appear

months later in a kind of house arrest in a hotel or similar compound, where they spend an administrative sentence and get re-educated.”

Although they face similar pressures to women, it is usually men and boys who are physically abused, such as being beaten by police officers. Furthermore, men are often still the financial providers of the family. Consequently, if they are taken away - e.g. through arrest or even if they are just threatened with losing their jobs, especially when they are civil servants, teachers or medical staff – this puts the whole family under financial strain. In many cases, being held in custody for weeks or months and being treated harshly there, leaves physical trauma, so that in some cases it is impossible for them to go back to work. Christian men also express concern about being compelled to participate in mandatory military service against their conscience.

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## 18) Myanmar

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home/expulsion, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Targeted Seduction, Trafficking, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

Christians feel they are viewed as second-class citizens across Myanmar, without the same legal protection and rights as the Buddhist majority. Women in Myanmar are also subordinate: Reflecting this, a traditional Burmese saying says: “Husband is god, son is master” (Burma Library, “Social Roles and Gender Stereotypes”).

According to the Buddhist Women Special Marriage Law introduced in 2015, a non-Buddhist husband must respect his wife’s practice of Buddhism. No such protection applies for Christians, however. Consequently, Christian women married to non-Christian men are pressured into following the husband’s religion. Such threats hinder the growth of the Church in Myanmar. The law, which was mainly aimed at the Muslim minority, also acts as a hindrance to women converts to Christianity from a Buddhist background (especially secret converts) as they are still counted as Buddhists and treated as such. Within mixed-religion marriages, if the daughter decides to be a Christian, the non-Christian father often arranges for her to be married to a Buddhist. The mother has no power to prevent this, nor does her daughter.

Among the Muslim Rohingya minority, non-family members also utilize marriage as a means of promoting Islam among Christian girls. Rohingya extremist groups reportedly abduct Rohingya Christian women, forcibly marry them to Muslim men and attempt to convert them to Islam. Additionally, there are instances when men have pretended to be a Christian - even getting baptized - in order to find a Christian girl. After getting married, they then apply pressure on their wife to convert to Islam. Armed forces pose a further threat to Christian women, particularly those belonging to ethnic minorities. They are often at their mercy, vulnerable to rape and physical assault. Instances of rape show little sign of decline.

Youth and female converts are also vulnerable to house arrest, as they are seen to be the least powerful within the family context. This restricts their access to community life, including Christian fellowship. If married, they may also be divorced by their husband, expelled from the family home and lose custody over their children.

Reports also indicate that Christian women in the predominately Christian Kachin State continue to be trafficked to China to become 'brides'<sup>48</sup>, where they are raped with the aim of impregnating them to produce male heirs (Human Rights Watch, 21 March 2019). China has recently come under criticism for propaganda that depicts these unions as 'happy marriages'<sup>49</sup> (Radio Free Asia, 5 Oct 2020). Kachin Christians have been exposed to these atrocities for many years - they are even targeted within IDP camps where the Myanmar army inflicts further torturous acts.

**Men:**

**Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home/expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Trafficking, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

In Myanmar, men are culturally encouraged to find work as the [primary breadwinners](#)<sup>50</sup> within the family unit; if they lose their job or are driven from their village or town because they are Christians, the whole family suffers and it causes emotional distress (Care International, "Rapid Gender Analysis, Myanmar – Rakhine State"). Such persecution is real and tangible for male converts, who have fewer job opportunities available to them. Others find themselves in cycles of forced labor. Converts also face threats, ridicule and physical beatings.

It is especially difficult for Christian men to practice their faith within the context of the armed forces. The Myanmar army has been known to impose forced labor on Christians as a means of preventing them from attending Sunday services and accessing Christian community. Several men have consequently lost their faith. Men are also targeted for recruitment into militias, such as the Kachin Independence Army. As a country expert explained, those who refuse are subjected to "tremendous intimidation, threats and torture...Pastors and leaders who discourage young men from joining the rebels are also targeted by the insurgents." Targeting church leaders also serves to harm the wider Christian community, much like a family is made vulnerable without their husband or father figure.

Na Ta La schools aim to convert Christian children, which is an effective way of stopping Christianity from spreading to the next generation. The boys at these schools are raised to become Buddhist monks; when they start at the Na Ta La schools, their heads are shaved, they are given monks clothes and they also go around the local community begging for food.

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/03/21/give-us-baby-and-well-let-you-go/trafficking-kachin-brides-myanmar-china>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/cross-border-marriage-10052020213023.html>

<sup>50</sup> [https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/images/GiE\\_Learning\\_RGA\\_Myanmar-Rakhine-State\\_COVID-19\\_August2020.pdf](https://insights.careinternational.org.uk/images/GiE_Learning_RGA_Myanmar-Rakhine-State_COVID-19_August2020.pdf)

## 19) Vietnam

### **Women:**

**Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Trafficking, Violence – physical.**

Gender equality has been a topic given much attention in Vietnam. Unlike so many countries where women are at a significant economic disadvantage, Vietnam has one of the highest participation rates of women in the workplace. [79% of women are in the workforce](#)<sup>51</sup>, compared to 86% of men (The Economist, 8 June 2019). Nevertheless, women bear an unequal share of domestic work in the home. As in much of Communist Asia, women are traditionally expected to care for their parents, which requires a significant investment of time and energy. Despite socialist ideals of equality, [Confucian values](#)<sup>52</sup> remain, embodied in sayings such as “1 boy is something, 10 girls is nothing” (Inside Asia, accessed 14 December 2020). This is also reflected in Vietnam’s son-bias and the ongoing practice of sex-selective abortions (VN Express, 19 July 2020).

Within this context, female Christians face pressure both for their faith and their gender. Some Christian women, particularly converts and those in tribal cultures, may be forced into early marriages. Youth leaders commonly report that following marriage, young converts will stop attending church. Indeed, these marriages cause some women to give up their Christian faith. Within marriages, women also face oppression, violence and threats of divorce from their husbands. This reinforces the feeling that they are unequal, creating fear and despondency.

Christian women and girls have also been victims of sexual assault for their faith, although there are no specific incidents which have been reported in 2020. However, forced marriage and the trafficking of brides to China among Hmong women (in northern provinces) continues to be an area of concern for Hmong Christians.

### **Men:**

**Economic harassment via work/job/business, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence – physical.**

Although men generally have [higher positions than women](#)<sup>53</sup> in the workplace (VOA News, 16 April 2019), Christian men also face discrimination and harassment at work, with some losing their jobs altogether because of their faith. Government officials have monitored and interfered with the work of known Christians. As men are the primary providers in Vietnam, this paralyses the whole family economically and weakens their place within society. If they are church leaders, their congregations are weakened and may even face closure.

Christian men in Vietnam are targets for arrest (on faith-related grounds) and abduction, causing many to flee their villages. According to a [2019 Amnesty International report](#)<sup>54</sup>, 128 prisoners of conscience were in prison at the time of publication, including several Catholic activists who were

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.economist.com/asia/2019/06/08/vietnam-has-one-of-the-highest-shares-of-women-in-work-in-the-world>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.insideasiatours.com/blog/2017/10/18/women-in-vietnam/>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/men-still-have-edge-communist-vietnams-gender-equal-system?amp>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/ASA4103032019ENGLISH.pdf%22%20/>

speaking out for religious freedom. One such activist was reportedly arrested for ‘producing, disseminating or spreading information and documents aimed at undermining Vietnam.’ Christians have also been jailed as a result of false charges. In one recent case, a Hmong Christian was accused of illegal logging when he was just re-building his home after villagers and local authorities destroyed it the previous year. Pressure is high on Hmong Christians in particular – several have reportedly been arrested in the WWL 2021 reporting period. Generally, once in custody, Christian detainees suffer harsh treatment, physical beatings and are put under pressure to renounce their Christian faith. According to reports, two church leaders who had been in prison, died just days after being released. They had been tortured.

Christians also experience pressure within the armed forces. Military service is compulsory for all men; evasion is punished by a prison sentence. Religious convictions are not grounds for non-participation. Within the armed forces, Christians are unable to read the Bible freely or partake in other Christian practices.

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## 20) Mauritania

### **Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied food or water, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Trafficking, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

Within Mauritania's tribal society, women are subject to the authority of their fathers and husbands. As such, the most vulnerable Christian females are those who have converted from Islam, the majority religion. Leaving Islam means disregarding father or husband and bringing shame upon the family. This will have severe consequences, especially since most women and girls are (financially) totally dependent on their families.

Traditional marriage practices place converts in a particularly vulnerable position. In Mauritania, one’s first spouse is generally chosen by the parents, and this selection often happens before a girl comes of age. As such, unmarried female converts might find themselves forced into a marriage with a Muslim man to keep them under the influence of Islamic family life. In general, most women do not have a choice in marriage. When it is discovered that a woman or girl is Christian, she may be deprived of food, bullied, and put under house arrest in order to keep her isolated. Additionally, she may be subject to caning and excruciating servitude; the presence of modern-day slavery (despite laws against it) and [the lack of protective legislation](#)<sup>55</sup> makes ruthless detention and exploitation of female converts more likely - and very hidden (OECD, “Social Institutions and Gender Index 2019, Mauritania”).

In this culture, a girl always stays in the family home and does not leave her family until she is married; otherwise, she will be labelled a prostitute. Married female converts can easily be

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/MR.pdf>

divorced and end up with no means to survive. In general, women can be easily divorced, and polygamy is still practiced.

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

Christian men in Mauritania who convert to Christianity bring shame upon their (extended) family. As a result, they are most likely to be ostracized, thus losing respect and status in society and among their friends. Many Christian men are expelled from their homes, or physically abused. Sometimes, converts feel forced to flee their town or country to avoid being forced to perform Muslim rites; if it is confirmed that they have converted, charges of apostasy can be brought in a religious court.

Christian men have also been imprisoned for anti-terrorism and cybercrime offences, charged for “undermining national security by insulting Islam and threatening Mauritania’s sacred principles”, as a country expert explains. Guilty verdicts can result in long prison sentences and high fines.

By excluding ethnic Africans from finding work or by forcing migrant workers to pay high fees for staying in the country, Christian men among them can be easily put under pressure to leave Mauritania. This is all part of a strong “Arabization” movement and many sub-Saharan African Christians do leave as a result of this, or live very difficult lives.

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## 21) Uzbekistan

**Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

While laws in Uzbekistan give equal rights to men and women, traditional Islamic culture places women lower than men and subservient to them within the family context. Total submission is expected from women to their parents, or if married, to their husbands. Whilst women have begun to [fight back](#)<sup>56</sup> against Uzbekistan’s strong patriarchal society (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 15 September 2020), perpetrators of violence against women commonly go unpunished, in part due to the [lack of legislation](#)<sup>57</sup> addressing domestic violence (Open Democracy, 4 July 2019).

Within this patriarchal context, women are not free to choose their own religion and will face severe opposition upon conversion to Christianity. Persecutors target women both to inflict harm

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/a-young-woman-fights-back-against-uzbekistan-s-strong-patriarchal-culture-/30840628.html>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/uzbekistan-gender-inequality-violence-en/>

upon them, but also as an instrument to cause psychological harm for their husbands and wider family members. Incarceration by a convert's family (i.e. house arrest) remains a common and socially accepted form of putting female converts under pressure. As a country expert notes, "women are expected to be much more submissive, and are thus more likely to be detained by their own family or harassed by the local community." Access to social networks, specifically Christian networks, is restricted in the hope that the convert will return to Islam.

Female converts, particularly those in conservative regions, run the risk of being kidnapped by their own communities and married off to a Muslim. Families, too, arrange such marriages in the hope that the convert will return to Islam. Sexual violence within those marriages is an often-unacknowledged component that becomes normalized under the legitimization that marriage gives. If already married at the point of conversion, Muslim husbands commonly divorce their wives and deny them their possessions.

Christian women and girls suffer from numerous daily pressures within the family unit, including verbal, physical, psychological and sexual violence. For women in rural settings, the lack of social and municipal infrastructure renders them entirely reliant on their families, with [few prospects](#)<sup>58</sup> for non-home-based jobs (ADB, 2018). The violation of rights of women and girls also creates fear and anxiety within families and church communities.

**Men:**

**Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Economic harassment via fines, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Church leaders, most of whom are men, are common targets for violations of rights. Typically, they will be fined, detained, denied exit visas to leave the country, or put under house arrest. They can be fined for such offences as meeting illegally, possession of religious literature, having Christian songs on their smartphones, etc. The persecution of church leaders is a deliberate tactic, as targeting them causes a ripple effect, spreading fear and anxiety throughout their congregations. Pastors and lay leaders of unregistered churches in particular have been insulted, beaten and humiliated.

Christian men continue to face inequalities in every area of their lives. Some men will be denied promotion at work, while others may lose their job altogether. Christian businessmen face constant state monitoring to see if they are involved in any illegal activities, as well as pressure from the local Muslim community who will often obstruct their business activities; this occurs mainly at the local level, rather than at the national level. As the man is normally the provider, this form of economic harassment has a crippling effect on the whole family. Family members feel fear, anger and anxiety. To avoid this, many Christian businessmen choose to keep their Christian faith secret.

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/479841/uzbekistan-country-gender-assessment-update.pdf>

Converts to Christianity also suffer from verbal, physical and psychological abuse, regularly being mocked in their places of work and study and coming under greater pressure from police officials. In addition, the obligation to fulfil military service also exposes Christian men to hostile situations and harassment.

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## 22) Laos

### **Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied communal resources, Discrimination/harassment via education, Forced out of home – expulsion, Imprisonment by government, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

While Christian men and women tend to suffer equal levels of social ostracism and pressure in Laos, there are areas of [additional vulnerability](#)<sup>59</sup> for Christian women (OECD, “Social Institutions and Gender Index 2019/20: Laos”). Violence against women is culturally widely accepted, including by women. Nearly [three in five women](#)<sup>60</sup> reportedly agree that it is acceptable “if women do not adhere to cultural norms.” Within this context, only one in five women who experience abuse report it to the local authorities (Georgetown, “Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20”, p.45).

Converts face the greatest levels of pressure. Within their local community they face mockery and isolation, which can extend to being denied access to communal resources such as water. Within the domestic sphere, they may be beaten, disowned or put under intense pressure to renounce their faith. Girls may also experience discrimination and harassment at school, although are less likely to be physically beaten compared to boys.

Since Christian men are commonly arrested and detained for their faith, women suffer economically from the loss of the financial provider, as well as emotionally as a wife. The families must usually pay considerable sums of money to secure their release, paralyzing them financially further. Without the aid of her husband, the woman is left with the burden of providing for their family or finding shelter if the village chief evicts them from the village. Female Christian leaders have also been arrested.

Pastors in northern areas of Laos have raised concerns about the increasing human trafficking of brides to China. A country expert summarized: “There is no strong indication yet that Christian women and girls are particular targets, but pastors are bringing this up as growing concern also of the church.”

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/LA.pdf>

<sup>60</sup> <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>

**Men:**

**Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Economic harassment via fines, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

Church leadership in Laos tends to be dominated by men, a role that has become frequently targeted. Pastors are vulnerable to attacks on churches and to incarceration by the authorities. Once detained, their families (or church congregations) often have to pay considerable amounts of money to ensure their release. The economic pressure of these fines, as well as the time when the church leader is absent, weakens church congregations and evokes fear. Families are similarly affected by these detentions, as Christian men remain the primary providers in Laos. While detained, leaders report harsh and degrading treatment. As one country expert explained: “The police are known for their brutal treatments on imprisoned people. It's not new that some prisoners even die under police custody.” Exemplifying the risks facing church leaders, one pastor was recently told by his relatives - who worked in the government - that he had been given a ‘black stamp’, meaning that ‘he can be taken and not be found.’

Male Christians also face persecution and unfair treatment in the workplace, causing additional economic pressure. They may be excluded from government and military jobs for example, or may lose their job altogether. For those in military training, men are conditioned to give their sole allegiance to the Communist Party and to hate the Party’s enemies. Among the enemies are groups that threaten to alter the culture and traditions of Laos; this includes Christianity, which is viewed as a Western and unwelcome religion. Within schools too, Christian boys are more likely to experience physical beatings and harassment.

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## 23) Turkmenistan

**Women:**

**Abduction, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Gaps remain regarding women’s legal protection in Turkmenistan, including against domestic violence and sexual harassment. In Georgetown's 2019 “Women, Peace and Security index”, it is noted that Turkmenistan lags behind the regional average score, due to “patriarchal norms and policies” ([Georgetown, 2019/20 report, p.43](#))<sup>61</sup>. The prevalence of Islamic culture places women in a subordinate position to men. Total submission is expected, both to their husbands as well as to their parents.

Female converts therefore, who by turning away from Islam challenge the existing accepted social order, are particularly vulnerable to persecution. They face physical beatings, house arrest, verbal abuse, threats and rejection. Female converts in conservative regions also run the risk of being kidnapped and married off to a Muslim, as a corrective measure. Converts may also be forced into

<sup>61</sup> <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>

marriages not due to kidnappings, but due to the obligation to follow pre-marital arrangements made by her parents prior to conversion.

Women and girls remain vulnerable to sexual harassment and rape, although they [rarely report](#)<sup>62</sup> such instances due to the attached stigma and shame, and impunity regularly granted to perpetrators. Cases of crimes against women are rarely seen in Turkmen courts (OECD, Social and Gender Index 2019, Turkmenistan).

Converts are safest if other family members convert too. In a case in the WWL 2021 reporting period, a Turkmen female convert was severely beaten almost every day by her husband. “He even tried to kill her several times,” a country researcher reported. “Later he got very ill and asked her Russian pastor to pray for him and became a believer. Now her husband is a pastor, and they serve God together.” This story, whilst hopeful, is not representative of the norm; many women choose to live as secret believers upon their conversion out of fear.

More broadly, abusing women is used as an instrument to intimidate and cause distress for their husbands and family members, thereby pressuring the wider Christian community and fostering fear and feelings of helplessness across the Turkmen Church.

**Men:**

**Denied access to Christian religious materials, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Economic harassment via fines, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Men in Turkmenistan normally hold leadership roles within the family, as heads of the family and financial providers, and within the Church. Pressure and violence directed against them affects entire families and congregations, causing fear, anger and financial hardship. Christians feel that state agents look for any excuse to issue fines to Christian men, for instance for holding illegal gatherings, for the possession of religious literature, even for downloading Christian songs. Pressure also comes from the community on a local level; Muslims obstruct business activities of converts and Protestants (whom they view as a sect), forcing many Christian business owners to keep their faith a secret.

Church leaders in Turkmenistan are especially targeted for persecution. Muslims consider them primarily responsible for leading people away from Islam and attack those they deem to be most active evangelistically. The State regard them as primary targets to control Christian activities; they expect a certain level of cooperation from those in leadership to inform them of anybody with radical or 'extremist' views. With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that the authorities also influence the choice of who assumes leadership positions. Church leaders also face challenges in obtaining religious training; many have been denied exit visas when going to Christian conferences and seminars. Tight restrictions exist over religious education and

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/TM.pdf>

institutions in Turkmenistan; training can only be conducted in special, state-licensed religious institutions. There are, however, no such institutions in Turkmenistan.

Christian men also face discrimination, intolerance and persecution within the context of the armed forces; military service remains mandatory in Turkmenistan, and objection on grounds of conscience is not permitted. Additionally, male converts face harassment and interrogation by their families and local communities. They may also experience threats, disinheritance, shaming and beatings.

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## 24) Algeria

### **Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Despite gaining [legal protection](#)<sup>63</sup> against violence against women in 2016 (CBS, 2 February 2016), Algerian women continue to be [disadvantaged](#)<sup>64</sup> in law and society, compounding the pressure that Christian women experience due to their faith (OECD, “Social Institutions and Gender Index: Algeria”). Christian women experience pressure in several public spheres, including within workplaces and educational settings. This includes the loss of jobs, harassment (particularly if they are unveiled), the possibility of sexual assault and death threats.

In the private sphere, too, female converts face severe violations of their religious freedom from family members. Conversion is forbidden and dangerous. Church leaders report that Christian converts (especially women) are often beaten, harassed, threatened and/or placed under house arrest for their faith by their Muslim families. In addition to restricting women’s access to meaningful community, families also prevent converts from accessing Christian radio or television channels. In the West and South of Algeria, violations are even more severe and converts risk being killed in order to restore the perceived ‘honor’ of the family. In the Kabylia region there is seemingly more freedom.

In the light of this pressure and violence, many female converts opt to hide their faith and live as secret believers. Should their family discover their Christian faith, it is likely that they would be forcibly married to a non-Christian as a corrective measure, and to restore them to the Islamic faith. If already married at the point of becoming a Christian, her husband can divorce her or use her faith to exploit her.

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/TM.pdf>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/DZ.pdf>

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Violence - physical, Violence - verbal.**

Christian men in Algeria regularly experience economic pressures, caused by harassment in the workplace and the loss of employment altogether. As men are the main providers in Algerian families, the loss of work can have a crippling effect on the whole family, creating fear and a sense of helplessness. Whilst not common, men are also more likely to be detained, which also affects their ability to work. In light of these pressures, some Christian men choose to emigrate.

Families are often the source of additional violations, such as physical beatings, verbal insults and threats. Like female converts, male converts face the most severe violations of religious freedom in comparison to other Christian men. Male converts in Algeria are more likely to be forced out of their home than their female counterparts. They suffer ostracism and rejection not just from their families, but from the wider community too. Upon discovery of their faith, they may also be beaten and taken to the local mosque by force. Under these pressures, converts are forced to live out their faith in secret.

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## 25) Turkey

**Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Enforced religious dress code, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

Although the Turkish legal system is generally not prejudicial as regards religious freedom, “elevating Islam’s public role in this constitutionally secular republic has been more than a slogan; it has found expression in many government policies,” according to the [Economist](#)<sup>65</sup> (reporting on 1 July 2019). As regards the rights of men and women, the prevailing culture and the lack of implementation of their equal rights under law allows for some gender inequality in practice.

In addition, one country expert writes: “There is a deep-seated feeling that women are responsible for the honor and shame of a family or community and if they are beaten or murdered that they might have done something to deserve it. Treating a wife like this is also a sign of manliness. Men feel that they can be aggressive to any women they feel that the woman is not being sufficiently modest.” Unsurprisingly, Turkey knows high levels of domestic violence and femicide. Several campaigns have been organized to change these attitudes, but Turkey nonetheless considers withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention combating violence against women ([BBC News](#)<sup>66</sup>, 30 July 2020, [New York Times](#)<sup>67</sup>, 25 August 2020).

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.economist.com/erasmus/2019/07/01/in-turkey-demography-is-a-brake-on-islamisation>

<sup>66</sup> [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-53596483?intlink\\_from\\_url=https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/c207p54mdq3t/turkey&link\\_location=live-reporting-story](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-53596483?intlink_from_url=https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/c207p54mdq3t/turkey&link_location=live-reporting-story)

<sup>67</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/25/world/europe/turkey-domestic-abuse-treaty.html>

Female converts are most vulnerable to persecution, particularly in rural areas. Within Islamic society they are already considered to have less authority than men and are subject to familial control. Becoming a Christian, or marrying a Christian, contradicts the expectations on women to bring honor to their family; they are expected to honor their families by their career choices, their relationships and their marriage choices. The violation of rights of women and girls affects their families, inspiring anger, fear and anxiety in other family members.

Converts – particularly those who are unmarried - face the threat of being locked in the family home. Reports indicate that girls have fled their homes to other cities in order to find safety. Converts also experience sexual abuse, harassment and rejection. Sexual abuse is rarely talked about in Turkey's shame and honor culture – as such, many victims carry trauma alone. Experts indicate that female Christians experience greater levels of mental abuse than men in general. They also note that “there is a rise in physical abuse for both genders.”

Christians also face pressure in the public sphere. Given the current increased emphasis on Islam in Turkey, women are likely to face increasing pressure to meet Islamic expectations of dress and conduct. Those who fail to do so risk being harassed, insulted and even physically harmed.

**Men:**

**Denied inheritance or possessions, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

In Turkey, media, police, bureaucratic and communal discrimination and hostility target both male and female Christians. However, men face the additional pressure of interwoven religious and cultural expectations: They are expected to be defenders of Islam and Turkishness, concepts which are closely aligned in public perception. Failure to live up to that expectation creates pressure on men that can prevent them from ever stepping foot into a church.

According to sources, men and boys are more likely to be deported, detained or threatened. They may be arrested and mistreated by the authorities, face job loss, inheritance loss or family rejection. During military service men are in an environment where, if their Christian religion is recorded in their ID, they are likely to be viewed with suspicion by their superiors and bullied by their peers. Despite obligatory military service, Christians are unlikely to rise in army ranks. Christians also have much difficulty finding employment in the public sector, while they also face discrimination in the private sector.

As men are the main financial providers, the violation of rights of male Christians can hit his wider family and community hard. It can cause anger, fear and anxiety. An expert notes the psychological toll for men in not being able to provide for their families: “The lack of work or properly paid work can impact the families financially. This can make them more dependent on foreign help rather than the church, in an honor/shame culture this could make men feel that they are not being 'manly' enough.”

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## 26) Tunisia

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to Christian religious materials, Denied custody of children, Discrimination/harassment via education, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Christian women and girls in Tunisia are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and domestic violence. On Georgetown's '[Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20](#)<sup>68</sup>', Tunisia ranked 121st out of 167 countries. Whilst the country has a relatively high female parliamentary representation, the report highlights the lack of education and employment opportunities for women and ongoing societal discriminatory norms. The culture is not generally respectful of women in practice, nor does it recognize women as leaders. The free movement of women and girls is also restricted. This gap in gender equality is also exploited as a means of religious persecution.

As conversion from Islam is forbidden, converts from Islam face the greatest breadth of persecution if their faith is discovered. Women are more at risk in the traditional family context (since men have more freedom to express their own opinion). They may be physically beaten, expelled from their home, put under house arrest, threatened with death and raped. If already married, she will likely be divorced, have her children taken away and have her financial support withdrawn. A country expert explains the difficult choice that married female converts have to make: "She has to choose which life she will grow up - the life with husband and kids or her life with the Lord." Some Christian women have been separated from their children for prolonged periods due to disputes related to their new Christian faith. Single female converts on the other hand may be forced into a marriage with a Muslim man, to "cover the shame." This is particularly common in rural areas.

The main source of persecution for women in Tunisia comes from the dominating male in the family: For a single female that would mean the father, the brother or any other family member who follows in rank after that (uncle etc.); for a married woman that would be her husband or even fiancé. A country expert describes the dynamics that can occur in particularly conservative regions: "Women are checked on by their 'male dominator' so it can be tricky to have a Bible or a Bible app. The girl is expected to leave her phone at any time where anyone can see it. Some husbands have a specific app to check the phone of the wife." Female converts therefore have little chance of accessing either Christian community or Christian materials.

<sup>68</sup> <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>

**Men:**

**Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

New converts to Christianity - both male and female - are by far the most vulnerable of Christians in Tunisia. Christian men who convert face intimidation, beatings and death threats. They bring shame upon their families by leaving Islam and are therefore likely to be ostracized. Pressured by their families, Muslim wives will leave a Christian convert, and he may be denied inheritance or even access to his possessions. However, the severity of backlash following conversion depends on his social position and his political standing within his community. While Christian men may have been expelled from their home when the family first learnt about their conversion, many have found that their families will quietly accept the conversion at a later point in time. Others however have been forced to permanently relocate, particularly away from rural areas.

Male converts also face loss of jobs and promotion, being denied access to social community/networks, as well as being detained by the police for faith-related reasons. When a man is persecuted, his family becomes vulnerable and lacks protection. The church, too, suffers. As a country expert reflects, “the lack of good male role models within the church is having a negative impact in its development.”

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## 27) Morocco

**Women:**

**Denied access to Christian religious materials, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

According to reports, most people in Morocco who declare their Christian faith are men, because they are less vulnerable to pressure than women. Although women's rights in Morocco have developed over the last sixteen years, which has given women more [legal equality](#)<sup>69</sup>, women in Morocco remain in a generally less advantageous position than men (The Parliament, 28 June 2018). For example, they have few economic opportunities, as highlighted in Georgetown's '[Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20](#)<sup>70</sup> (p.15), making them dependent on men. Cultural expectations bind women to the home and domestic duties, especially in rural areas.

Converts from an Islamic background are most vulnerable to religious persecution. While all Christians from an Islamic background can, in practice, be denied their rights to inheritance or family affiliation, this is a particular risk for women. They are also more vulnerable to arbitrary

<sup>69</sup> [https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/partner\\_article/hrwf-international/morocco-advancing-womens-rights](https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/articles/partner_article/hrwf-international/morocco-advancing-womens-rights)

<sup>70</sup> <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>

divorce and the denial of access to their children. Personal status law follows the country's Maliki-Ashari Sunni interpretation of Sharia. One country expert writes that "as long as the personal status law is not subject to change, this kind of persecution will continue."

They are further exposed to domestic confinement, forced marriage to a non-Christian and being expelled from the home. In some instances, the pressure is simply so intense that the girl relents and agrees to a marriage to someone who does not share her faith in order to escape the pressure of her family. As these pressures demonstrate, religious persecution against women characteristically takes place within the private sphere, in the family home. Family members fear the scandal of their daughter's conversion, particularly if she is bold enough to demonstrate it in public. Considering these pressures, it is extremely difficult for converts to grow in their faith. Gaining access to Christian religious materials is extremely difficult. If found with a Bible, she will be severely beaten. Christian women using the Internet as a way to break isolation, risk experiencing cyber harassment for their faith and self-expression.

Although Moroccan society is relatively liberal in some respects, Christians from an Islamic background in rural areas must adhere to the religious form of clothing and way of life and may suffer bullying if they change these customs, especially during Ramadan.

Additionally, rape, or the threat of rape, is a taboo area that is socially associated with a woman's personal honor, which is linked to her family's honor. The high stigma makes it a powerful tool for religious coercion. This is the case both for Moroccan women and for the numerous female sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco, of whom a proportion are Christian; their rape is not just motivated by exploitation but also by religious intolerance.

**Men:**

**Denied inheritance or possessions, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Imprisonment by government, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

In general, converts to Christianity are among the most vulnerable in Moroccan society. By leaving Islam, they are perceived to bring shame upon their families. Within the domestic sphere, they will likely be ostracized by their families. If young and unmarried, a male convert will likely be denied financial support. If already married, he risks abandonment by his wife, whose family will also place pressure on the couple in order to ensure she is freed from his influence. Additionally, a convert can, in practice, be deprived of his inheritance. If single, he will also face pressure to marry a Muslim, although this pressure affects women more. If he reaches the age of 40 however and is still single, the pressure will mount.

Christians, particularly converts, also face difficulties in the public sphere. They are more likely than women to be targeted for government interrogation, beatings or imprisonment. However, the severity of the backlash after conversion depends on their social position and political standing within his community. Employment is also a key area of pressure for men, as they are usually the main providers in their families. They may lose their jobs or be harassed in the workplace, throwing them into economic uncertainty. It will be harder for them to secure new

employment if their faith is known. Christians are sometimes accused of having converted for financial gain, since Christianity is associated with opulent Western society. Discrimination has also been reported in educational settings.

Every year, there are reports of a handful of arrests of Christian men. These arrests occur for nothing more than having a Bible in their possession, or for discussing Christian faith with a Muslim. Fines can accompany the harassment.

The pressure from families and society can be so sustained that male converts leave their homes, particularly those who are threatened with death. This makes Christian fellowships harder to form or sustain. As one country expert describes, Christian men have become numb over time: “The prolonged suffering of Christians has made them not feel the severity of persecution. They do not pay attention to the extent of the damage caused, due to the absence of training on how to report gross violations of human rights.”

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## 28) Mali

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied custody of children, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Targeted Seduction, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

There has been a resurgence of attacks by Islamic militants since the last quarter of 2019. Militant groups kidnap girls and forcibly marry them to some of their members. Whilst this does not affect Christian girls alone, it is considered a common tactic used by Islamic militants to spread Islam, and is a widely feared threat for female Christians. Christian women live in an ambience of Islamic culture with its associated and imposed dress code. They experience social rejection and when facing persecution, the children suffer repercussions of whatever befalls their parents. When parents are separated, or fathers are killed or some other loss of subsistence income occurs, some Christian girls feel they have no option to survive but prostitution. Widows are also particularly vulnerable to this.

In Mali, female converts to Christianity are most vulnerable to pressure and violence for their faith. They are exposed to harassment and threats, sexual abuse, physical violence and even killings. Single converts will likely be forcibly married to a Muslim, in order to reduce the shame brought upon the family. Married converts face forced divorce and the possibility of losing their children. This is particularly common in northern Mali. Women have also reportedly been expelled from their homes. Even where it is tolerated that they live in the vicinity, they are not supported or fed, making them extremely vulnerable. Although there are national laws that protect women and girls in general, traditional and cultural practices and gender norms make women more vulnerable to such treatment. Mali has one of the world’s [highest rates](#)<sup>71</sup> of child marriage in the world, with 54% of girls married before the age of 18 (Girls Not Brides).

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/mali/>

As a result of the traumatizing pressures that Christian women and girls face, families and communities are weakened.

**Men:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied inheritance or possessions, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced divorce, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

As violent militant attacks continue unabated across Mali, Christian men and boys are particularly subject to death-threats and to violent, physical attack because of their faith. Targeted attacks on Christian homes and businesses are effectively being used to impoverish families. This dire situation for Christians can be exacerbated by the targeted loss of inheritance rights, social rejection or the blocking of access to positions of responsibility and scholarships. Converts face the greatest level of persecution in this regard. Married males may additionally be forcibly divorced by their wives.

Within the context of widespread poverty and [ongoing violence](#)<sup>72</sup> in one of Africa's poorest nations, men and boys are exposed to recruitment by jihadist groups where they will be forcibly converted to Islam (Human Rights Watch, July 10 2020). They may also be abducted by such groups and killed. Those living in rural and remote areas in northern parts of the country are especially vulnerable to forced recruitment into violent groups. This has a devastating effect on their families and fellow Christians who are traumatized by such persecution. In an attempt to protect Christian boys, they may be separated from their parents and moved to safer areas, but this creates other challenges.

The loss of Christian men and boys financially weakens families, as males are the primary providers in Mali. It also weakens the health of the Church in Mali.

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## 29) Qatar

**Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to Christian religious materials, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

While women in general in Qatar face restrictions and limitations to their human rights, due to Sharia and the cultural Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, these same restrictions make Christian women particularly vulnerable to religious persecution. General limitations on women include

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<sup>72</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/08/12/mali-security-forces-use-excessive-force-protests>

being required to [obey their husbands](#)<sup>73</sup> (Human Rights Watch, Qatar: Events of 2018), being [legally vulnerable](#)<sup>74</sup> to domestic violence and being restricted legally to inherit half of what a similarly situated male relative would receive (UNDP: “Qatar: Gender Justice and the Law”). Qatari women and girls are subject to guardianship by their male family members, which means that there are accepted privacy standards in the culture: Whatever happens in the family home cannot be interfered with by the authorities.

Within this context, it is especially difficult for female converts to Christianity. Conversion from Islam to another religion is forbidden, and those who do so must usually conceal their new religious beliefs. If their faith is discovered, they risk being ostracized by their families and local community. Their families have the authority to limit their travel, keep them under house-arrest, deny them financial support and access to the internet, phone or books. It is much easier to apply pressure like this on women and girls. As a country expert explains: “The family could lose influence over a [male family member] as he could walk away from the family and become independent. This is not desired, so with [males] one wants to apply different kinds of measures. For ladies, independence is not a real option, so forcing dependency places them in a relation of master-slave in the hope to change the believer back to Islam.” Whilst rarer, women have also been expelled from the family home, and must navigate a society that is hostile to women living alone. Converts also risk facing physical violence, or in the most extreme cases, honor killings. Thus, those who convert tend to remain silent about their conversion.

Additionally, women from a Muslim background are legally restricted from marrying a non-Muslim. A frequently mentioned form of religious persecution facing female converts is forced marriage to a religious person who is expected to humiliate her in order to convert her back to Islam; this person can restrict her freedom for a lifetime. Some may even be married to one of the most religious uncles or nephews as his second wife, where she may live a life essentially as a sex-slave deprived of any community or respect. If already married before they convert, women may be pressured to divorce by their husbands and lose custody of their children. Women are the “endorsers of faith-values” to the children, a country expert explained, and as such her conversion will bring shame upon the family. The loss of this role, as well as being a mother, can result in hopelessness and aimlessness.

House maids working in Qatar often face sexual harassment or slave-like treatment. The ill treatment of migrant workers, including sexual abuse, has become a high-profile issue at the international level. Although not primarily faith-related, many Christian domestic migrant workers, almost all of whom are female, experience (sexual) abuse.

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied inheritance or possessions, Economic harassment via work/job/business, False charges, Forced out of home – expulsion, Imprisonment by government, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/qatar>

<sup>74</sup> <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Qatar%20Country%20Summary%20-%20English.pdf>

Besides the official restrictions on non-Islamic religious expression in Qatari society, Christians try to keep a low profile by self-censoring. When a Christian comes under public scrutiny, it is usually a male Christian, since it is essentially men who are visible in the public sphere and so most at the forefront of interaction with the authorities. Those in Christian leadership are required to report details of church activities; these are also men and are particularly subject to scrutiny.

Male converts are not immune to domestic pressure; when their conversion becomes known, the larger family can threaten that their wives and children will be taken away and placed with another family. In the 'best' circumstances, the wives could agree to live with their husband on the condition that the children will not be informed of the faith of the husband. Such converts might be able to privately carry out acts of Christian worship, but they cannot then share their faith with their children. These combined restrictions mean that Qatari men are effectively isolated and find it very difficult to meet with other Christians or be taught and grow in their Christian faith. In more extreme cases, men can face physical and psychological trauma for their faith, be expelled from the family home, or even lose their lives.

Furthermore, Christian men are also under pressure in the area of employment, since the loss of a man's status and job will affect the whole family through loss of income, future prospects and social isolation. They may also be victims of unjust court cases and false imprisonment, although instances of this are relatively rare. As men are the primary providers, if he is imprisoned or persecuted at work, the loss of income can affect his whole family and threaten his sense of purpose.

Church compounds for expatriates are also highly monitored. Known Muslims (whether nationals or non-nationals) are not permitted by the authorities in the officially sanctioned "Religious Complex" and a non-national would risk deportation. These are all issues which directly concern men primarily.

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## 30) Colombia

**Women: Abduction, Forced marriage, Forced to flee town/country, Targeted seduction, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Although there is no particular law that puts women and girls in specific danger, in practice, there are situations in which Christian women have to overcome [challenges](#)<sup>75</sup> in order to live their faith without fear (Open Doors International, November 2018). Despite the cessation of hostilities in Colombia, cases of sexual violence against women [continue](#)<sup>76</sup> in rural areas where armed groups use them as a weapon of war to generate fear (UN Association of Australia, 25 March 2020). Women belonging to indigenous and Afro-Colombia ethnic groups are disproportionately [affected](#)<sup>77</sup> by conflict-related violence (ONU Mujeres, Colombia).

<sup>75</sup> <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/COLOMBIA-Compound-structural-vulnerabilities-facing-Christian-women-2018-FINAL-WITH-PREFACE.pdf>

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.unaa.org.au/2020/03/25/women-peace-and-security-achievements-in-colombia/>

<sup>77</sup> <https://colombia.unwomen.org/es/onu-mujeres-en-colombia/las-mujeres-en-colombia>

For instance, within indigenous communities the authorities oppose Christians who refuse to accept the indigenous rites and customs; Christian women may be forced into marriage with a non-Christian indigenous man or be abandoned by their husbands, separated from their children, threatened and ostracized by the community. This exposes them to forced displacement where they are vulnerable to criminal groups, trafficking and sexual exploitation. Experts report that forced prostitution has increased in some areas of Colombia, such as the Bajo Cauca region.

In areas under criminal control, the guerrilla indoctrination of children also affects Christian girls, since they not only have to accept the violent ideologies imposed despite their faith, but their vulnerability exposes them to becoming victims of rape and sexual harassment. Some girls are 'bought' from their parents on pain of death. This phenomenon also affects Christian families who are forced to give up their daughters, targeted for their perceived purity and obedience, to cartel leaders for sexual purposes – or even marriage. In other instances, the girl may be targeted for seduction. This serves to both satisfy the sexual desires of the criminal commanders, as well as to silence the work of churches. Children of church leaders are especially vulnerable. One pastor has been on the run with his daughter for months, fleeing the hands of criminal leaders who want to molest her. Female pastors have also been targeted and labelled 'witches', including by leaders of the Catholic church.

*Secular intolerance* is also a persecution engine that affects women in Colombia. Women have also been victims of forced abortion and the forced use of contraceptives. This pressure is carried out more aggressively in schools in rural areas, where pupils are pressured into the use of contraceptives despite their parents' disagreement. This interferes with their right to educate their children according to their principles and beliefs.

Country experts have also observed the negative impact of COVID-19 on women; in 2020, unemployment opportunities fell, particularly in the [service sector](#)<sup>78</sup> (FIP, 1 August 2020) where women usually work, and the percentage of calls due to domestic violence rose by [162%](#)<sup>79</sup> (Observatorio Colombiano de las Mujeres). Whilst this affects women of all faiths, it gives some indication of how the COVID-19 crisis has created additional vulnerabilities which can be exploited for the purposes of religious persecution. Criminal activity has worsened during the pandemic.

**Men:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via fines, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Christian men have always faced a higher level of threats and violence, partly because they represent the head of the family (or of the church, if they are pastors or priests). Both men and boys are in particular danger in regions of armed conflict. As the providers for the family, men

<sup>78</sup> <http://empresaspaiddh.ideaspaz.org/ser-mujer-un-riesgo-en-medio-de-la-pandemia>

<sup>79</sup> [http://www.observatoriomujeres.gov.co/archivos/publicaciones/Publicacion\\_6.pdf](http://www.observatoriomujeres.gov.co/archivos/publicaciones/Publicacion_6.pdf)

face being extorted to provide finances for armed groups; non-church leaders face the risk of being killed; pastors or priests may be physically assaulted, extorted for financial gain, forced to leave their regions, or even killed.

Within some indigenous communities in particular, converts to non-accepted forms of Christianity face extreme pressure. They may be beaten, harassed, threatened or sent away to do forced labor in a different territory. This, as a country expert explains, “is seen as a need to stop the 'threat' and 'bad example' that their conversion means for the rest of the community.”

Illegal armed groups continue to pose one of the greatest threats to Christian men and boys, who are exposed to abduction, forced recruitment and violence at their hands. They are subject to indoctrination and mandatory participation in the activities of these groups which may include abductions, surveillance activities, sexual abuse, killings and trafficking. In the case of indigenous people, illegal armed groups benefit from their knowledge of the terrain and use them as “security rings” which leaves them more [exposed](#)<sup>80</sup> (Infobae, 20 June 2020).

According to [COALICO](#)<sup>81</sup>, there has been a dramatic increase in the recruitment of children into armed groups in 2020, in part due to an exploitation of the COVID-19 crisis by criminals (COALICO, June 2020). In light of threats and reprisals, many see it as an “inescapable destiny,” one expert explains. Even if the children are able to escape the clutches of these gangs, they will face life-long threats from former gang-members and risk abduction in the future.

There is a noticeable lack of trauma management and resocialization programs for men. Gender-based policies promoted by the government do not give men the same opportunities to educate themselves or to participate in programs for managing and overcoming vulnerability. This is because, as men, they are expected to be stronger.

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## 31) Bangladesh

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Forced marriage, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

Bangladesh is culturally class-based and patriarchal. Despite the country being led by female politicians for many years, Bangladesh is still a country where it is normally dangerous and difficult to be a woman. It has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world, with [59% of girls](#)<sup>82</sup> being married before they turn 18 (Girls Not Brides). Although the overall child marriage rate in Bangladesh has declined and altered in structure in recent decades, the rate of child marriage continues to be the highest in the world.

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.infobae.com/america/colombia/2020/06/20/la-oea-alerto-sobre-reclutamiento-forzado-de-menores-por-grupos-armados-en-colombia/>

<sup>81</sup> <http://coalico.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Bolet%C3%ADn-ONCA-No.-23.pdf>

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/bangladesh/>

In this context, women and girls – particularly converts - are most vulnerable to rights violations from their nuclear family, extended family, friends, neighbors and local community. Conversion is viewed as a betrayal of their culture and religion. Because women and girls are mostly dependent on males, sexual assault, rape and forced marriage are common forms of religious persecution. They are not only abused physically, but also mentally. Violence against women and girls in Bangladesh has [reportedly](#)<sup>83</sup> increased during the COVID-19 crisis and female Christians have been vulnerable to these forms of persecution (Human Rights Watch, 29 October 2020). For example, in the Spring of 2020 a female convert was abducted on her way home. Due to the lockdown, her parents could not search for her, and police took longer to rescue her. She had been tortured and raped for several months by the time she was found.

Abduction and forced marriage remain a significant threat facing Christian women and girls, including in [refugee camps](#)<sup>84</sup> (Human Rights Watch, 13 February 2020). As a country expert explained: “Abduction of young girls from minority communities, indiscriminate rape, and conversion under threats are rampant and used as tools for persecution.” Many kidnapped girls remain missing and law enforcement has been inadequate. Victims of sexual abuse struggle to move on from the trauma, particularly if they become pregnant by their abuser. A Christian girl who was abducted, raped and impregnated describes her struggles: “What a cruel inhumanity this is! My future is finished. I am hopeless, frustrated and depressed. I cannot show my face to my friends, relatives, nobody.” “We love Jesus,” she added, “And I paid the most for it.”

On the other hand, more and more women are being empowered to join the [workforce](#)<sup>85</sup> and are therefore gradually gaining more independence (Georgetown, 2020).

**Men:**

**False charges, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

One result of the patriarchal cultural norms in Bangladesh is that males generally become Christians first, followed by their families later. As leaders within their families, men and boys often face persecution first. They are commonly beaten for ‘betraying their culture and religion’ and threatened. Pressure from community members and local Muslim leaders has also caused men to flee from their homes. One convert – who was found – was tortured and forced to renounce his faith. Church leaders in particular are victim to false accusations and imprisoned for “converting Muslim people to Christianity with money.” They have also been falsely charged with rape.

Reflecting the severity of the pressures that converts face, a teenage boy took his own life in early 2020 due to the pressure he received from his parents, which including being forced to worship Buddhist idols. (Please note that suicides do not contribute to the WWL scores).

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/29/i-sleep-my-own-deathbed/violence-against-women-and-girls-bangladesh-barriers>

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/13/christians-abducted-attacked-bangladesh-refugee-camp>

<sup>85</sup> <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>

As men are the main providers, if they lose their job because of their faith - or are imprisoned - it will affect their whole family. The additional economic hardships of the COVID-19 crisis has pushed many families to breaking point.

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## 32) Burkina Faso

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied inheritance or possessions, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Targeted seduction, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

Burkina Faso is located in a region where Islamist groups have a huge influence, and the central government is very weak, particular in the eastern regions of the country where Islamic law is applied. As noted by a country expert, jihadists have exploited this weakness during the COVID-19 crisis to gain control of the country's infrastructure. Within this context, there is a high potential for women and girls to be abducted by militants during raids. The militants may force them to marry one of their members, or use them as labor. Christian girls will also be put under intense pressure to convert to Islam.

Raping Christian women and girls is a common method of attacking Christian communities. In many areas, there is very little understanding of women's rights, so many people consider it normal to sexually assault a woman. However, girls and women who are abused think that they have brought shame and stigma to the family, and the feeling of worthlessness can weaken the family spiritually if not addressed. In particular the daughters of Christian leaders are often identified for rape and targeted seduction. As a country expert notes, "the consequences of rape can destroy their family life and bring frustration to the Church."

Converts from an Islamic or traditional religious background face additional pressures. Families beat them, give them in forced marriage, withdraw them from school and in some instances, chase them out of the family. Some young women are also threatened with death. Although Burkina Faso is a CEDAW signatory and has committed to ending [child, early and forced marriage](#)<sup>86</sup> by 2030, 52% of girls are married before their 18th birthday (Girls Not Brides). Within this context, forced marriage is easily accessible as a form of religious persecution. Another common form of pressuring converts is to keep them under house arrest.

### **Men:**

**Abduction, Denied inheritance or possessions, Forced to flee town/country, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

Islamic militant groups operating in the Sahel region often recruit their members from countries like Niger and Burkina Faso. Christian men and boys could be targeted both for recruitment, as well as physical attacks. Reflecting the particular dangers facing men and boys, in one instance a

<sup>86</sup> <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/burkina-faso/>

pastor and his children were abducted in the Sahel; the girls were released, but the boys and their father were executed. The abduction and killing of Christian men causes fear and trauma in Christian communities, as well as economic fragility as the men are normally the family providers. Further fracturing the stability of the Church, many men and boys flee the country due to the pressures they face.

Converts from a Muslim background face further challenges. As conversion to another religion is considered a betrayal by some families, they may be rejected and denied their inheritance.

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### 33) Tajikistan

**Women: Abduction, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Although in Tajikistan the law generally gives equal rights to men and women, traditional culture puts women in an inferior position compared to men and requires them to be obedient to male family members. Domestic violence is widespread, and perpetrators are commonly granted impunity, in light of a "[prevailing culture of silence and frequent inaction by the police](#)" (OECD, Social and Gender Index 2019: Tajikistan).<sup>87</sup>

As Tajikistan is a predominately Muslim nation, female converts from Islam are particularly vulnerable to intolerance, discriminating pressure and violent persecution. Because Islamic teaching expects women to submit in all ways to the men in the family, in practice, women do not have the independence or freedom to choose their own religion. If their conversion is discovered, female converts run the risk of being locked up, beaten, rejected, harassed, or forced to marry a Muslim. In particular, women and girls who had a premarital arrangement before their conversion will be forced to marry. If they were already married before becoming a Christian, she will likely experience beatings from her husband and be forcibly divorced. In short, they are put under immense pressure to recant their new faith.

The state authorities in Tajikistan prohibit the use of religious clothes or symbols, also of those worn by female Christians. Among some Baptists and Pentecostal groups, married women traditionally cover their head with a headscarf. This headscarf is different to the one used by Muslim women, but there is concern that it could possibly become a future cause for arrest.

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied inheritance or possessions, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Economic harassment via fines, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

<sup>87</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/TJ.pdf>

Like other parts of Central Asia, men in Tajikistan normally hold leadership roles within the family and within the churches. As such, there is more pressure on men from the police. From time to time, police officers disrupt meetings and interrogate the Christians attending. The local authorities often impose fines on Christians because of their faith and for legal reasons such as gathering without a permit, possessing and printing religious material without a permit, or perceived proselytization. Rights violations by the state include searches, detention, interrogation, confiscation, fines and imprisonment. When detained by the police, Christian men suffer verbal and physical abuse, threats, beatings, and also pressure to become an informer. If a man is a church leader, his treatment by the authorities will affect his church and cause levels of fear to rise.

At the hands of the local community, Christian men can lose their jobs and suffer beatings, threats, verbal and physical abuse, discrimination, ostracization and pressure aimed at their family members. Men are the main providers and if they lose employment it affects the whole family. Within the context of mandatory military service, too, Christian men have been exposed to various forms of physical and mental persecution.

Known converts will be harassed and interrogated harshly by non-Christian members of their family and community. At the hands of his own Muslim family, a Christian convert may face beatings, humiliation, home detention, rejection and loss of inheritance. For young men who are students and still needing financial support, such financial dependency can be the means parents use to prevent conversion going ahead.

Due to strict laws about religious education, the State restricts the training of church leaders. As church leaders are predominately male, this affects men the most, particularly those belonging to non-Orthodox groups.

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## 34) Nepal

### **Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied citizenship, Denied communal resources, Denied food or water, Discrimination/harassment via education, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Although the multi-cultural society of Nepal is granted religious freedom in the 2015 Constitution, there are also anti-conversion and blasphemy laws in place. It is dangerous for converts to Christianity to reveal their faith. When their faith becomes known, they are often discriminated against by their peers, socially ostracized and risk being severely beaten by family members. The immediate family members of female Christian converts may lock them up. After being isolated, they are often deprived of basic needs, educational support, family possessions, and basic legal rights such as citizenship. Physical violence comes gradually after emotional and mental pressure. In an initial phase, they may be locked in the home, but they may end up being social outcasts, putting them in a particularly vulnerable position. On rare occasions, families

make premarital arrangements to marry their daughters to a non-Christian man or expel the convert from the home to fend for herself.

In the historically Hindu nation and culturally patriarchal society of Nepal, women and girls have less ability to exercise their rights. Perhaps the most difficult aspect is the persistency of the harassment for those who convert to Christianity. One woman who converted four years ago continues to suffer mental, physical and now sexual abuse at the hands of her father-in-law if she goes to church. In other situations, if a Christian woman's husband is not Christian and not supportive of her faith, she is unlikely to be aware of the legal possibilities of defending herself and her children and may be divorced.

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied citizenship, Denied communal resources, Denied inheritance or possessions, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, False charges, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Christian men and boys who are recent converts are particularly vulnerable to physical and mental torture from family and society, and are made to feel like social outcasts. They are often denied access to ancestral property by immediate family members and denied basic legal rights to a birth certificate and citizenship by local government administrators. Furthermore, known converts face harassment in public places such as markets and the workplace. Men and boys have also been victims of false charges and accusations, which have resulted in imprisonment on rare occasions.

According to Nepali law, citizens cannot be barred from public office because of their religious beliefs. However, Christians in public service, especially in the armed forces, have complained that in actual practice they are denied promotion because of their faith. In rural areas, it is reported that Hindus obstruct Christians from being a part of communal and other public forums. In the Nepalese army, government positions and police, Christians are forced to worship Hindu gods and observe Hindu festivals. This includes eating food offered to idols or putting vermilion powder on their heads during the Hindu festivities. Christian men usually migrate to new cities or areas to set up afresh and avoid economic deprivation.

Local independent church pastors and leaders are the main targets of harassment for faith related reasons. Hindu radicals will focus their attacks on church leaders i) to set an example to other Christians in the area, and ii) because they are regarded as being the main actors behind the increasing numbers of Christian conversions. Religious training is closely monitored and funding for Christian institutions closely scrutinized.

When men and boys are severely beaten and socially ostracized, they have fewer economic opportunities for supporting the family. Most men and older boys are the providers for the family, so this form of discrimination means that the whole family faces both economic troubles and social insecurity.

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## 35) Central African Republic

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to Christian religious materials, Denied access to social community/networks, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via fines, Enforced religious dress code, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Targeted Seduction, Trafficking, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

The many years of violence and instability in CAR has left Christian women and girls particularly vulnerable to rape, displacement, abduction and forced marriage as forms of religious persecution. “Rape in the Central African Republic is a weapon of war” explains a country expert. It is “used by armed groups to terrorize, influence, intimidate and traumatize their enemies.” Some girls who are abducted are subjected to sexual slavery; sexual abuse is a source of shame for women and girls, and they can struggle to move on from the trauma, particularly if they become pregnant.

Within the context of high poverty rates, parents are sometimes enticed into giving their Christian girls in marriage in exchange for significant gifts. In other cases, Christian girls who thought they would be free to practice their faith once married to a Muslim discover that they are instead forced to convert. Students, especially female students, face the risk of abduction and sexual violence while on the way to and from school. This has discouraged parents living in high-risk areas from sending their daughters to school. Girls who are abused and become pregnant are likely to drop out of school.

In CAR, women are generally more dependent on their families than men, so family-driven persecution affects them more. Because CAR is one of the poorest countries in Africa, ranking near the bottom of almost every indicator, financial need can drive Christian women with many children to agree to convert to Islam in order to survive. Converts to Christianity face further pressures from family members. They can be put under house arrest to prevent them from meeting with other Christians or forcibly married to a much older Muslim. There are reports that sometimes a Christian mother is only allowed to attend Christian gatherings on condition that her children are sent to the mosque.

Christian women also face pressure to follow an Islamic dress code. Some women have been harassed and fined for not covering their heads according to the dress code.

### **Men:**

**Abduction, Denied inheritance or possessions, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

When Christian families are targeted by radical militias, Christian women in CAR are usually sexually assaulted and left alive, while men are killed for their faith or detained by the militia. A country expert explained: “The jihadists kill Christian men because they think they are reducing

‘potential enemy’.” Pastors are especially targeted and sometimes false accusations revolving around resources are used as a pretext. Pastors have even been attacked during church services.

Christian men also experience discrimination in the workplace. The Islamic leaders occupy all the market places, control trade and impose large taxes on Christian businessmen or even loot the shops of Christians to keep them in poverty. Boys and men are at times forcibly recruited into rebel militant groups and they are also targeted for torture and assault. Within national military service, too, they can experience discrimination on the grounds of their faith. Abduction, killing, threats and the tactical impoverishment of men is greatly affecting Christian families.

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## 36) Ethiopia

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence – sexual.**

Violations of basic rights against Christian women in Ethiopia often occur in the form of abduction and forced marriage to a non-Christian. This is facilitated by a general situation in which abduction and forced marriage remain present at a national level despite having been [illegal since 2016](#)<sup>88</sup> (Equality Now, accessed 4 December 2020). The forced marriage of [children as young as eleven](#)<sup>89</sup> remains relatively common and sources reveal that it continues to occur in rural parts of the country (Pacific Standard, 25 September 2018). Female Christian teens (and converts in particular) are forced to marry a follower of a different religion after abduction or family arranged marriage. Following her “marriage,” the Christian wife is expected to take on the religion of her new husband.

Rape is also an effective means of punishing a Christian woman or girl. The result is that the community will isolate her, her family will be shamed, and she may no longer be able to marry. As a country expert explains “her future will be destroyed” and “her family will be disgraced.”

Female converts from Islam face the most severe violations, particularly at the hands of family members. They may be deliberately isolated from other family members and from their church community, put under house arrest in order to protect the family’s honor, physically abused and forcibly married to a Muslim.

When a Muslim wife converts to Christianity, divorce is the most likely outcome. Even if her spouse does not seek a divorce, his family will pressure the spouse to divorce and claim custody of the children, to protect the family name and ensure their grandchildren are given an Islamic upbringing. In areas where Christianity is a minority religion, a (de facto) divorce is most likely to take place outside courtrooms; the elders presiding over a tribal court see Christian faith as a

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.equalitynow.org/makeda>

<sup>89</sup> <https://psmag.com/magazine/letter-from-addis-ababa-ethiopia-inside-a-safe-house-for-ethiopian-women>

dangerous deviation and will likely grant custody to the other spouse in order to prevent the spread of Christianity in the community.

Christians often face difficulties in procuring their inheritance after their decision to convert; it is reported that this affects mainly women. Since [79% of the population](#)<sup>90</sup> live in rural areas, inheritance is viewed as one of the main means to survive (World Bank data, accessed 4 December 2020). Inheritance rights are in principle handled through official state institutions where religious discrimination is minimal. However, in areas where traditional systems are still dominant, or in the many cases that do not go through the official state process, part of the exclusion for new converts includes disinheritance. As a country expert explains, it is intentionally used to “frustrate converts from their decision.”

**Men:**

**Denied inheritance or possessions, Discrimination/harassment via education, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Violence - death, Violence – physical.**

Christian men in Ethiopia are more likely to suffer physical attack and displacement than women and girls. They may also be robbed of their possessions, or even killed. It is deemed more strategic to attack men and boys, as they are usually the providers for their families. Attacking them weakens their whole family. Converts have reportedly been forced to flee their towns and settle elsewhere to avoid attacks and harassment.

The government also plays a role in violating men's religious freedom. In the WWL 2021 reporting period, several Christian men were jailed after attending religious training in Asela and Kombolcha. Men are particularly at risk of imprisonment in Muslim-dominated areas.

In addition, there are numerous instances and allegations of government interference in church elections and appointments. Since the majority of church leaders are men, these violations mainly affect Christian men. The allegations target almost all leaders of major churches in the country, accusing them of being pro-government and of receiving appointments through government influence. New reforms continue to be discussed, however, and there is some hope that in future years this will become less common.

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## 37) Mexico

**Women:**

**Abduction, Denied/restricted healthcare, Forced marriage, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence – sexual.**

Although there is no specific national law that puts women and girls in particular danger, there are many challenges facing Mexican women, particularly in light of ongoing organized violence.

<sup>90</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=ET>

According to information from the Mexican government's [Executive Secretariat](#)<sup>91</sup> (Centro Nacional de Información, 30 September 2020), from January to September 2020, 724 femicides were committed in Mexico, especially in the State of Mexico, Veracruz, Mexico City and Chihuahua. Within the WWL 2021 reporting period there has been an [increase in family violence](#)<sup>92</sup> against women, which has been linked to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Data-Pop Alliance, 27 October 2020). The pandemic has also been [exploited](#)<sup>93</sup> by criminal gangs, who have recruited and trafficked women made vulnerable by economic instability (CNN, 17 August 2020).

Christian women face various challenges within their families and communities. In indigenous communities, [forced marriage](#)<sup>94</sup> is still a cultural tradition, despite government efforts to eradicate it (Animal Politico, 4 November 2019). According to Girls Not Brides (accessed 7 December 2020), [26%](#)<sup>95</sup> of girls are married before they reach the age of 18 in Mexico. Christian converts from this background may be forced to marry non-Christian indigenous men; tribal authorities consider this a way of pressurizing them to renounce their faith. Verbal and physical abuse (including sexual violence) is used to pressure them into following the traditional religion.

Furthermore, in some indigenous communities in Mexico, girls are victims of trafficking under the ["mask" of the dowry](#)<sup>96</sup> (Infobae, 10 October 2019). The dowry is an ancestral tradition which has now become a mere economic transaction. In earlier times, it was a present that one family offered to the other for the happiness of a new couple; nowadays, families negotiate the value of girls with prices range from 40 to 150 thousand pesos.

Since Mexico is one of the countries with the [highest rate](#)<sup>97</sup> of human trafficking in the world, women are easy targets for recruitment for abduction and sexual slavery, most commonly by illegal armed groups (US Department of State, "2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Mexico"). Criminal leaders target children of Christian homes, because their attitude of obedience is presumed, making it easier to instruct and indoctrinate them. Those who resist, face threats against their own lives as well as those of their families, motivating internal forced displacement. Additionally, the fact that women are forced to maintain a relationship with members of criminal groups leads to an inevitable threatening of their Christian faith and that of the family; in many cases this dynamic leads to their separation and breakdown. Women who convert to Christianity and desert such groups are likely to find that their families face punishment in the form of violence or the threat of violence.

As public services are operated and distributed by ethnic leaders within indigenous communities, 'non-accepted Christians' are frequently hindered in accessing healthcare services as they are not viewed as properly belonging to the community. Women, who are conditioned to use

<sup>91</sup> [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1p9M\\_mt-4jmn3CE8IB9qEu0sYLAO67fp/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1p9M_mt-4jmn3CE8IB9qEu0sYLAO67fp/view)

<sup>92</sup> <https://datapopalliance.org/using-data-to-shed-light-on-the-shadow-pandemic-of-domestic-violence-in-mexico/>

<sup>93</sup> <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/video/coronavirus-tijuana-mexico-prostitucion-mercado-sexual-pkg-matt-rivers/?fbclid=IwAR3wcZoZP729ySMiBZfhp8MCoMfgbTBRjVJTWePnwiVrkPjJa8Ryy2OWRo#0>

<sup>94</sup> <https://www.animalpolitico.com/2019/11/matrimonios-forzados-veracruz-ninas-dinero/>

<sup>95</sup> <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/mexico/>

<sup>96</sup> <https://www.infobae.com/americas/mexico/2019/12/04/venta-de-ninas-una-tradicion-centenaria-en-comunidades-indigenas-de-guerrero-oaxaca-y-chiapas>

<sup>97</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/mexico/>

contraceptive methods (mostly non-reversible) in exchange for social assistance, are most affected.

**Men:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via fines, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – verbal.**

Within the context of ongoing violence and organized crime, the risk of young men and boys being killed in Mexico is high. The country's homicide rate has [risen since 2014](#)<sup>98</sup>, although remains lower than some neighboring countries (BBC News, 18 February 2020). While there is no law which makes Christian men and boys particularly vulnerable to hostility on grounds of faith, in the areas controlled by criminal groups or drug cartels, young men are exposed to indoctrination and forced recruitment into these groups. Some young men accept this as an inescapable destiny due to their economic and social circumstance. Those who do not accept it - whether for reasons of Christian faith or otherwise - face threats and potential abduction and killing. Families, too, are bribed and intimidated to force their children to obey the gangs. The Jalisco Nueva Generacion Cartel (CJNG), the Gulf Cartel (CDG) and Los Zetas are the main criminal organizations for [recruiting](#)<sup>99</sup> children and adolescents (Vanguardia, 30 April 2019).

Men in Mexico generally face intense pressure and violence as the heads of families and leaders of churches. Threatening the male head intimidates the wider families and communities. When armed criminal groups wish churches to cease functioning or to limit their activities, the threats are often aimed first at the religious leader of the church. In the WWL 2021 reporting period, there have been several examples of priests and pastors being beaten or kidnapped for ransom. Church leaders are also the most frequent victims of fines and extortion, since it is believed that they must have access to church funds. Leaders are also targeted in order to prevent them from conducting positive work within the community or speaking out against illegal activity, especially in the context of COVID-19.

Converts from an indigenous background face particular pressures; they may be beaten, harassed and rejected from the community. The level of pressure and violence increases if the convert is deemed to be a Christian leader, since such leaders are understood to incite rebellion.

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<sup>98</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-50315470>

<sup>99</sup> [https://vanguardia.com.mx/articulo/cartel-jalisco-nueva-generacion-del-golfo-y-los-zetas-son-los-que-mas-reclutan-ninos-para?fbclid=IwAR1NpVdFycEwjOvfN-E\\_WFy-MAfj4FmrhMpqtICOerHev-6Elv\\_Ua\\_ERH8](https://vanguardia.com.mx/articulo/cartel-jalisco-nueva-generacion-del-golfo-y-los-zetas-son-los-que-mas-reclutan-ninos-para?fbclid=IwAR1NpVdFycEwjOvfN-E_WFy-MAfj4FmrhMpqtICOerHev-6Elv_Ua_ERH8)

## 38) Jordan

### Women:

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Targeted seduction, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Of all the categories of Christian community in Jordan, it is above all female converts from Islam who are particularly vulnerable to persecution for their faith. Pressure comes most often from family members. If she still lives with her family, she risks house arrest, isolation, beatings and sexual harassment. Female converts can also be prevented from meeting with other like-minded Christians as a punishment for conversion and to prevent the individual from bringing more shame upon the family. Although arranged marriages are not uncommon in Jordan, female converts are under additional threat to be married off involuntarily in a further effort to retain family honor and bring the daughter back on 'the right path.' This can extend to honor killings, which are a risk for converts in rural areas. Whilst no such instances have been reported in the WWL 2021 reporting period, it remains a risk.

Female converts from Islam cannot officially marry male Christians. Even if they marry abroad, the state does not recognize such marriages. When married to non-Christian husbands, female converts risk physical and verbal abuse (women might also face similar challenges if their formerly Christian husband converts to Islam). They are also faced with travel restrictions; travel bans can be imposed by the authorities but also by family members, for instance to prevent the female convert from leaving the country. If this ban is violated, a court case can be started for "travelling without permission." Female converts are also under the threat of forced divorce and loss of custody of their children. The attitude of the spouse's family is crucial in this issue.

The recognized churches in Jordan have been working on the [revision of personal status laws](#)<sup>100</sup>, to improve the position of women regarding divorce and inheritance rights (Zenith, 25 October 2019). Discussions remain ongoing and inheritance remains influenced by Islamic tradition. Jordanian culture is highly conservative and patriarchal and change is slow. While the legal age for marriage is 18, some girls continue to be married earlier from the age of 15 with judicial consent ([UNDP](#): "Gender Justice and the Law: Jordan"<sup>101</sup>). The personal status laws also facilitate house arrest and forced marriage, to which young female converts are particularly vulnerable.

Apostasy laws continue to pose challenges to Christian women. In cases decided by a Sharia court, judges can annul converts' marriages, transfer child custody to a non-parent Muslim family member or declare the children 'wards of the state' and convey an individual's property rights to Muslim family members. In divorce cases between a Christian wife and Muslim husband, a wife used to automatically lose custody of the children when they reached seven years. [Recent legal developments](#)<sup>102</sup> have granted mothers' greater custody rights, irrespective of religious back-

<sup>100</sup> <https://magazine.zenith.me/en/society/christians-jordan-church-and-legal-reform>

<sup>101</sup> [https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Jordan%20Country%20Summary%20-%20English\\_0.pdf](https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Jordan%20Country%20Summary%20-%20English_0.pdf)

<sup>102</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/jordan/>

ground (USDS, “2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Jordan). Christian convert women remain at risk of losing their children however, if their new faith is discovered, as conversion to Christianity remains illegal under Sharia. If a divorced Christian woman becomes a Muslim, she can gain custody rights over the children and receive an inheritance from her husband. This puts a lot of pressure on divorced Christian women to convert.

On a wider level, all Christian women face pressure to follow a specified dress code. According to a country expert, “Christian women are more singled out in public settings as dressed less appropriately and are subject to harassment.” Christian women have also been reportedly strategically targeted for the purpose of marriage and conversion.

**Men:**

**Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Economic harassment via fines, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

Job discrimination affects all Christians, especially those working in the public sector. General unemployment rates for all men in Jordan have risen in recent years and have been worsened still by the COVID-19 crisis, with a reported [23% of people](#)<sup>103</sup> out of work (The World Bank). This has increased the pressure on any men who have lost their jobs because of their Christian faith. If their faith becomes known, Christian men with a Muslim background can be denied security clearances and jobs, or face extortion through fines. In the mostly traditional and tribal Jordanian society where men are regarded as the financial providers for their families, this can cause economic troubles for the wider family, as well as feelings of worthlessness for men.

Under Sharia, marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men are not allowed. For the marriage to be legal, the man must convert to Islam. This makes legal marriage impossible between a Christian man who is not a convert and a Christian woman with a Muslim background. Sharia law also determines that if a Christian wife converts to Islam, her husband must convert as well for their marriage to remain legal.

Christian men who are converts to Christianity face further difficulties in an honor-shame culture when their families reject them and expel them from their homes because of their choice of religion. They are susceptible to violence “by extended family group beatings,” as one country expert describes. Christian men also face pressure from the state authorities. Men are reported to be interviewed by intelligence services and placed under pressure to provide information on other Christians, especially if they are part of a ministry helping converts. Pastors and denominational leaders are also targeted for interviews.

The result is that such difficulties all too often prompt men to emigrate in what could appear to be an economic migration but is actually rooted in the situation caused by their Christian faith. If the pressure on Christian families leads to emigration, this has a potentially negative effect on future church leadership.

<sup>103</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/jordan/overview>

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## 39) Brunei

### **Women:**

**Denied custody of children, Enforced religious dress code, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Although Brunei is a CEDAW signatory, Human Rights Watch reported in May 2019 about the [threat](#)<sup>104</sup> the new Syariah Penal Code poses to minority groups such as women and religious minorities (HRW, 22 May 2019). Despite international condemnation, rights and freedom continue to be [restricted](#)<sup>105</sup>, including religious freedom and the rights of women (New Naratif, 30 October 2019).

Male and female converts to Christianity face the most pressure for their faith. Due to the ever-stricter implementation of Islamic laws, women are forced to wear a hijab and are punished by the religious authorities when they refuse to wear one. This generally does not apply to known Christian families, but to converts (although all women will need to wear a veil in Government positions). Similar to the experience of male converts, women and girls are usually disowned by the family when their conversion becomes known. The family often isolates them, and Imams are called to make them recant. They may also be forced to attend Islamic spiritual rehabilitation programs. For unmarried women, sometimes their families also threaten them with forced marriage to Muslim men they know. Married converts to Christianity are likely to have their children taken away from them in order to ensure they are raised as Muslims. As a country expert commented, the decision for custody of children comes down to one factor: “Muslim trumps all.”

### **Men:**

**Forced out of home – expulsion, Violence - physical, Violence - verbal.**

As stated above, male and female converts to Christianity face the strongest levels of pressure for their faith. Men and boys are usually disowned by the family when they convert and are forced to leave the family home. They also face beatings, humiliation and harsher treatment when persecuted by religious authorities. Students may also experience discrimination and verbal abuse within educational settings.

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<sup>104</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/22/bruneis- pernicious-new-penal-code>

<sup>105</sup> <https://newnaratif.com/journalism/critiquing-the-response-to-bruneis-syariah-penal-code/>

## 40) Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Targeted seduction, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence – sexual.**

DRC is a complicated country, politically, socially and economically. Women across several areas of DRC, particularly those dominated by Islam, are commonly treated as inferior. This has an impact on their experience of much of life - exemplified by the denial of education for girls. A country expert noted that “displacement and insecurity make it difficult to pursue one’s education properly.” In addition to this background discrimination, Congolese Christian women are vulnerable to abduction, rape, sexual torture and forced labor, especially as perpetrated by the Islamist ADF group. Many Christian women are reportedly abducted, forcibly married, and kept as a kind of “trophy.” Christian women - particularly converts - may be forcibly married, forcibly impregnated or forcibly divorced. These forced marriages are often early marriages, as sources report that elderly Muslim men often prefer young Christian girls. Child marriage rates are high in the DRC, with some [37% of girls](#)<sup>106</sup> marrying before they turn 18 (Girls Not Brides).

Kidnappings and instances of rape most commonly occur at the hands of armed groups in the north-eastern regions, causing extreme psychological distress and trauma for the victims. According to experts, women are sometimes raped next to male hostages, who are bound. Certain terrorist groups seek Islamization through violent means, forcibly marrying abducted women to militia leaders and subjecting others to a life of sexual slavery. Young girls are also recruited through non-violent means, including through targeted seduction by young Muslim men.

Due to the shame of sexual violence, Christian women and girls may face isolation and rejection from their families and communities following an attack. In the local culture, it is believed that rape causes ‘[contamination](#)’<sup>107</sup> both physically as well as psychologically, a belief that causes some husbands to reject their wives altogether (. In more extreme cases, an attack may cost a girl her life. In February 2020, one girl died after being brutally gang raped by the Mai-Mai rebel group.

### **Men:**

**Abduction, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence – sexual.**

In the complicated country of the Democratic Republic of Congo, political, social and economic tensions make life difficult for much of the population. In a context of violence and impunity, Congolese Christian men face extreme forms of persecution, including maiming, abduction, forced recruitment into militia groups, forced labor, sexual mutilation, disemboweling and brutal killings. To escape their kidnapers, men may be forced to pay large ransoms; these

<sup>106</sup> <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/>

<sup>107</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3271036/>

fines paralyze already impoverished families, sentencing them to live out the next few years in even more desperate poverty. Even without punitive ransoms, Christian men reportedly face discrimination in the workplace and in some cases, are denied the opportunity to work.

The targeting of Christian men in these ways also serves to weaken their families as well as the wider Church. Church leaders are also targeted, especially if they have publicly denounced violence.

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## 41) Kazakhstan

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - verbal.**

Although Kazakh law gives equal rights to men and women, gender equality has not been achieved in practice. This is in large part due to traditionalist views that consider women as subservient to men (UNH, Spring 2020). A report by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#))<sup>108</sup> published on 11 November 2019 congratulated Kazakhstan for its progress in reducing maternal mortality and improving girls' access to education. Nonetheless, it also noted the lack of effective measures necessary to address gender-based violence against women, as well as the prevalence of polygamy, child and forced marriage and bride kidnapping. The issue of domestic violence has since been [highlighted](#)<sup>109</sup> as a pervasive problem (Human Rights Watch, 21 March 2019). The traditional Islamic and cultural practices which treat women as inferior to men is felt to be the main factor that makes women and girls, who convert to Christianity, more vulnerable to pressure and violence for their faith.

Female converts are at greater risk of suffering physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats and house arrest. A family might keep a convert under house arrest, since the exposure of a convert in the family would bring great shame to the family in the eyes of the community. Such persecution is experienced especially by converts, but non-convert Christians who are married to a non-Christian may also experience this. Forced marriage to a Muslim is not uncommon and is sometimes linked to abduction. Spouses and children of converts in the countryside have also experienced pressure from their families who try to keep them within Islam. It is difficult for a woman to escape these pressures as she stands little chance of living on her own, due to high unemployment and a lack of financial dependency (Open Democracy, 19 June 2018).

The persecution of Christian women serves to create fear and anxiety in families and Christian communities. Persecuting women can also be used as an instrument for persecuting their husbands.

<sup>108</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25277&LangID=E>

<sup>109</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/06/kazakhstans-unheard-voices-domestic-violence-victims-0>

**Men:**

**Denied inheritance or possessions, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Economic harassment via fines, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological, Violence - verbal.**

In the public sphere, men tend to have roles with [higher levels of responsibility](#)<sup>110</sup> than women, and the religious persecution which Christian men experience reflects this socio-cultural structure (OECD Gender Policy Delivery Review, 2017, “Kazakhstan”). Church leaders are normally male and men are the head of the family and the main financial providers. Pressure comes from both the State as well as family and community pressures.

State-based persecution has included interrogations, fines, detention and imprisonment. When a Christian gathering is raided, the leaders (generally men) bear the brunt of the raid. Church leaders have also been imprisoned following these interrogations. Further, obligatory military service for young men provides an extra potential risk of persecution because it is a highly controlled environment in a Muslim-majority state. Further, those Christians, who for religious reasons, do not want to take up arms are still forced to join the army.

Family-based persecution affects converts from a Muslim background. They face harsh verbal harassment and physical beatings. Young men who are still students and need financial support, risk losing this support upon conversion. Compounding the issue for young male converts seeking a Christian education, a recent regulation now restricts travel for educational purposes. These regulations severely limit the opportunity for Kazakh citizens to travel abroad to study in institutions of Christian education. Since men travel more than women, men are affected more.

When a Christian man becomes a target for persecution - for instance, losing his job - his whole family will be affected. Earning a living remains complicated for Christian men since they are directly affected by the bribes required of Protestants in order to run their businesses. Converts in the countryside are especially under pressure at this point. Some business owners keep their Christian beliefs a secret. Reports indicate that Protestants are persecuted in this way but not Orthodox Christians, and converts most definitely face pressure on their businesses from the local authorities and local community. Converts and church leaders particularly risk losing employment due to their faith. If a man is a church leader, any persecution he faces will also affect the congregation he serves, which can easily result in an increase of fear in the church community.

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<sup>110</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/gov/Gender-Highlights-Kazakhstan.pdf>

## 42) Cameroon

### Women:

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Discrimination/harassment via education, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence – sexual.**

Cameroon is a secular country, yet the Far North region suffers from the violent presence of Boko Haram. Christian women in northern Cameroon are subject to several forms of persecution related to their status in society. Boko Haram continues to regularly abduct women and girls, forcing them into marriage with one of their members or subjecting them to forced labor and rape. They are further put under extreme pressure to renounce their faith and embrace Islam (USDS: “2019 Report on international Religious Freedom: Cameroon”). Where schools are still running, some Christian parents keep their girls at home out of fear for their safety. Exemplifying just how dangerous these militants are, country experts indicate that several girls have been forced to act as suicide bombers to further decimate Christian populations.

Female converts to Christianity from a Muslim or Animist background face further pressure within family and community. Linked partly to a lack of education, women in Cameroon are dependent on their husbands or fathers and when they make the decision to convert to Christianity, it is sometimes considered as an act of defiance. They can be denied the opportunity to socialize with other Christians and imprisoned within the family home, if necessary. Unmarried converts risk being forcibly married to a non-Christian, particularly in the north of the country. Married converts conversely face the prospect of divorce, the loss of custody of their children and disinheritance. When a Christian marries a Muslim and they later separate, the family often refuses to hand over the children, because they insist the children must be brought up as Muslims. Poverty and financial dependency<sup>111</sup> make Christian women and girls more vulnerable to these various pressures (Relief Web, 23 October 2019).

Compounding these pressures, strong governance is lacking in Cameroon and arbitrary arrests<sup>112</sup> have demonstrated the injustice of the legal system (rfi, 26 June 2020).

### Men:

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied inheritance or possessions, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced to flee town/country, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence – physical.**

Boko Haram also poses a major threat to Christian men and boys living in the northern regions of Cameroon, particularly church leaders. Men have been abducted by militant groups, tortured and used for forced labor. Others have been forcibly recruited into the ranks of militias. This leaves Christian families without a family head and provider, making them vulnerable to attacks themselves. Communities have become reduced in size due to such attacks, compounded

<sup>111</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/cameroon/data-gender-equality-cameroon>

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20200626-these-girls-escaped-boko-haram-face-lengthy-jail-terms-cameroon>

by many men leaving the locality for safer areas. Conflict in the Anglophone region, also known as the Southern Cameroons region, has also fueled instability in the country and caused many people to flee, including Christians.

Christian men also face discrimination in the areas of job opportunities and promotion. Furthermore, they also experience hindrances from government officials where they oppose corruption. When a man refuses to get involved in unethical practices because of his Christian beliefs, he is taunted and called a coward. When jobs are refused due to discrimination, the family cannot thrive. Boycotts also affect Christian families economically, financially and psychologically.

Male converts to Christianity also face pressure from family and community members. They may be rejected by their nuclear families and be denied their due inheritance.

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## 43) Bhutan

### **Women:**

**Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

At times, Bhutan has been considered an [“island of women’s entitlements in Asia”](#)<sup>113</sup> (Verma Priyadarshini, "Women in Bhutan: Exploring their socio-cultural status in the late 20th century", Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Volume 75 [2014], pp. 920-927) and men and women enjoy equal rights under the law. However, despite gender inequality that has historically favored women, in the democratic system women represent a relatively small percentage at parliament and local government levels. Bhutan also has a high rate of child marriage, with 26% of girls getting married [before the age of 18](#)<sup>114</sup> (Girls Not Brides). This environment of contradictions puts a lot of family pressure on women without providing them with much independence outside the family structure.

Christian women who convert from Buddhism to Christianity are at the greatest risk of persecution, typically through being disowned by their families, or divorced by their husbands. A divorce is relatively [easy to procure](#)<sup>115</sup> in Bhutan, increasing the fear among female converts that their husbands might decide to leave them (OECD, 2019, “Social Institutions and Gender Index: Bhutan”). Christian women married to non-Christians are also socially under pressure to stay with their husbands despite domestic abuse. Furthermore, whenever Christian women are married to a non-Christian and do not want to convert (e.g. to Buddhism), they often face intense pressure from their husband and/or husband's family to convert in order to avoid the shame of a divorce. For single converts, the possibility of forced marriage is a tangible threat, although no such instances have been reported in the WWL 2021 reporting period. Alternatively, they may be disowned entirely by their families and forced to leave the family home.

<sup>113</sup> <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44158477>

<sup>114</sup> <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/bhutan/>

<sup>115</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/BT.pdf>

**Men:**

**Denied inheritance or possessions, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Violence – psychological.**

Although men and women enjoy equal rights under the law, traditional matriarchal society means that there is still preference in practice for inheritance and land ownership to pass down the [female line](#)<sup>116</sup> (Alternative report by the Tarayana Foundation for the 44th CEDAW session, 2009). In this context, Christian men and boys often experience persecution through families, being disowned by their family, asked to leave the family home, and losing inheritance. They will likely experience strong pressure from their peers and local community, compounding the sense of isolation and rejection.

They further experience pressure in the work place. When male Christians lose their job or are excluded from the traditional way of farming, the entire family is affected by the economic loss as he is typically the financial provider.

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## 44) Oman

**Women:**

**Denied access to Christian religious materials, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Despite the legal declaration that all citizens are equal, Oman's [Personal Status Law](#)<sup>117</sup> perpetuates multiple gender inequalities. For example, Section 38 requires women to obey their husbands. The law also perpetuates [inequalities](#)<sup>118</sup> around divorce, inheritance and child custody (UNDP, 2018, "Oman: Gender Justice and the Law"). This is reflective of the generally vulnerable position of women in the ultra-conservative society of Oman, where fathers, husbands and male guardians exert significant control over their lives. Women typically stay in the family home with their children and assume a subservient role. This has an impact on their faith; as they have no voice in Omani society, they are not expected to have their own religious opinions. As such, it is extremely difficult for women to convert from Islam to Christianity, and they will experience severe persecution should they do so; the level of persecution converts experience reflects their social standing. As an expert explains: "An elder son who financially supports his parents and his family who becomes a believer is likely to have less severe persecution from his family. An unmarried daughter living at home will likely receive more severe persecution."

<sup>116</sup> [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/BTN/INT\\_CEDAW\\_NGO\\_BTN\\_44\\_8208\\_E.pdf](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/BTN/INT_CEDAW_NGO_BTN_44_8208_E.pdf)

<sup>117</sup> [http://odaa.oregon.gov/events/personal\\_status\\_law\\_english\\_sharia\\_law.pdf](http://odaa.oregon.gov/events/personal_status_law_english_sharia_law.pdf)

<sup>118</sup> [https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Oman%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English\\_0.pdf](https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Oman%20Country%20Assessment%20-%20English_0.pdf)

One of the first ways of exerting pressure on converts is to isolate them from other Christians, stripping them of all means of communication and keeping them within the family home. Unmarried converts may also be put under pressure to marry a Muslim in order to force them to return to Islam. Converts to Christianity do not have the option of marrying a Christian spouse, as women registered as Muslims are legally restricted from marrying a non-Muslim.

Housemaids working in Oman can face sexual harassment or slave-like treatment. The ill-treatment of migrant workers, including sexual abuse, has become a high-profile issue at the international level. Although not primarily faith-related, many Christian domestic migrant workers, almost all of whom are female, experience (sexual) abuse.

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence - verbal.**

It is very difficult for Muslim men to convert to Christianity in Oman. Christian converts are likely to suffer from the ramifications of social ostracism, both by immediate and extended families, as well as by the greater community. Men who convert to Christianity are likely to lose the financial support of their families as well as the necessary connections to find or maintain a job in Oman's network-based society. Furthermore, no Omani family will allow their daughter to marry a man who disrespects his own family by rejecting them and all they have taught him.

If a convert has family and employment at the time of his conversion, he risks losing it all. When a man leaves Islam, by law he automatically loses custody of any children; his wife might divorce him and he can easily lose his job, which has major implications for all his family members since men are traditionally the breadwinners for their families. Converts may even be exiled from their family home, placing them in an extremely vulnerable position.

As to expatriate male Christians, any pressure they experience because of their faith is most likely encountered at the workplace. There is a clear risk that they might lose their workers visa if their faith activities are too public or otherwise undesired.

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## 45) Mozambique

**Women:**

**Abduction, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Trafficking, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

According to local sources, the most common violations affecting Christian women and girls in the country are sexual harassment and rape – attributed to the incursion of Islamic militants - and forced marriage to militants. Mozambique has one of the highest rates of early marriage in the

world, with [53% of girls](#)<sup>119</sup> being married before they reach 18 (Girls Not Brides), fuelled by low education and employment opportunities for women and girls. Victims of forced marriage and rape have been psychologically and emotionally traumatized by these events.

Abduction is also commonly used as a tool for violating rights of freedom. As a country expert observed, “it is becoming a chronic issue.” During the WWL 2021 reporting period there have been numerous reports of abductions across areas of the country where jihadists and their cells exert influence. In addition to marriage, girls are also used for forced labor. The practice of viewing women more or less as domestic slaves and tools of sexuality has fuelled the abduction of women by insurgents to use for sex as well as domestic chores.

Converts from a Muslim or African Traditional Religion background are also vulnerable to persecution from within the family sphere. Many Muslim families living in Mozambique force suspected female converts to marry a Muslim man to ensure that they cannot get involved in Christian activities. If already married, converts face the threats of divorce and the loss of custody of their children. They may also be denied their due inheritance.

**Men:**

**Economic harassment via work/job/business, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence – physical.**

According to country experts, *Islamic oppression* is the most common persecution engine affecting Christians in Mozambique. One shared that “attacks that target both government and Christian properties have become common in the province where the jihadists are active.”

It is reported that Christian men and boys have been killed in these attacks, or have lost their farmland and properties, leaving their families economically crippled. Young boys have also been forcibly recruited into militias; In early 2020 more than 50 young boys were reportedly massacred for refusing to join rebel groups.

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## 46) Malaysia

**Women:**

**Forced divorce, Targeted seduction, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

In Malaysia, the legal rights of women and girls are undermined by provisions that make exceptions for Sharia law. [Civil society organizations](#)<sup>120</sup> stated in a February 2018 CEDAW report that “Muslim women now enjoy far less rights in marriage, divorce, guardianship of their children and inheritance than their non-Muslim counterparts.” The report also stated: “Other areas of gross discrimination against women under the Islamic Family Laws include divorce, polygamy and child marriage” (Musawah, 19 February 2018).

<sup>119</sup> <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/mozambique/>

<sup>120</sup> <https://www.musawah.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Malaysia-SIS-Musawah-Joint-Oral-Statement-2018-CEDAW69.pdf>

These laws open avenues of vulnerability for females converting from Islam to Christianity, the most prevalent being the threat of sexual violence and/or forced marriage to a Muslim. Since the minimum legal age for marriage in the Islamic family laws (16 for female) can be lowered [with the consent](#)<sup>121</sup> of a Sharia judge, it is possible for girls to be married (OECD, “Social Institutions and Gender Index, Malaysia” 2019). This law can make girls who convert to Christianity much more vulnerable. ‘Love traps’ have also been reported, whereby Muslim men pursue Christian women with the intention of marrying them and encouraging them to convert to Islam. After a year or two they then divorce the woman. This is an effective tactic because once Christian women are registered as Muslims, there is no mechanism for reversing this, even in the event of divorce. Additionally, all children born as a result of the so-called “marriage” are also legally considered Muslim. Unlike the targeted seduction described above, the forced marriages of Christian women reported in Malaysia are often connected to the socio-economic situation of the family, wherein the family agrees to an arranged marriage as a means of securing financial support.

The COVID-19 crisis has reportedly caused an [increase](#)<sup>122</sup> in domestic violence, which is likely to have impacted Christian female converts too (UNDP, 9 September 2020). On rare occasions, Christian women are also vulnerable to being detained and interrogated by authorities about Christian networks and leaders.

**Men:**  
**Violence - physical, Violence - verbal.**

Following a period of political instability, the new PN government is a point of concern of Christians in Malaysia. While the PH government had pledged to sign the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, ultra-conservative Muslim groups strongly oppose this as they fear it will encourage apostasy and proselytism of Muslims. Men and boys are often the target of these ultra-conservative Muslim groups. The persecution typically impacting Christian men also comes in the form of bullying at the hands of vigilante justice or monitoring by religious authorities.

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## 47) Indonesia

**Women:**  
**Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Violence - physical, Violence – sexual.**

Gender inequality in Indonesia is an ongoing issue acknowledged by the government; however, patriarchal gender norms, child marriage and high maternal mortality rates remain [largely](#)

<sup>121</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/MY.pdf>

<sup>122</sup> <https://www.my.undp.org/content/malaysia/en/home/blog/2020/domestic-violence-amid-covid-19-in-malaysia--diving-deeper-into-.html>

[unaddressed](#)<sup>123</sup> (The Globe Post, 22 June 2018), and it is estimated that [one-third](#)<sup>124</sup> of Indonesian women have suffered physical or sexual abuse (Reuters, 12 April 2017). Recent media reports have highlighted a lack of effective implementation of legislation, noting that it is often challenging for victims to report incidents and [access justice](#)<sup>125</sup>, particularly in the context of COVID-19 which has caused a rise in gender-based violence (Jakarta Post, 8 October 2020).

In this context, most reports of rights violations facing Christian women and girls have to do with the threat of divorce, which means losing their physical and economic security, more so in the rural areas. Christian women who are the first in their household to convert to Christianity are most vulnerable to forced divorce. In a patriarchal system, it is harder for the wife to influence the husband than it is for the husband to influence the wife. Many women choose to keep their new faith a secret, which can lead to beatings and violence if discovered.

On rare occasions, single Christian converts may be pressured into marriage. In one instance, a Christian woman was romantically pursued by a Muslim man; once she fell pregnant, however, he stated that she would have to convert to Islam to marry him. To avoid the stigma and embarrassment of being a single mother, she agreed to his request. Islamization campaigns by pressure groups using such tactics have ceased, although this remains an area of concern.

In addition, Christian women are marginalized through enforced religious dress codes. In provinces like Aceh, women are required to wear a hijab, especially within the government office. Women who are caught not wearing the hijab may face interrogation and be labelled as immoral women.

**Men:**

**Imprisonment by government.**

In Indonesia, both female and male Christians face violations of their rights. However, for men this occurs less in private areas of life. Instead, reports indicate that prominent male figures like Christian pastors and activists are the primary targets for public religious discrimination. They can face accusations and have to stand trials for charges such as “inciting religious hatred.” In one such incident, activist [Sudarto](#)<sup>126</sup> was charged under the controversial ‘hate speech’ law for reporting on the banning of Christian celebrations in West Sumatra (International Christian Concern, 1 October 2020).

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<sup>123</sup> <https://theglobepost.com/2018/06/18/gender-inequality-indonesia-women/>

<sup>124</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-women-rights/one-third-of-indonesian-women-suffer-abuse-prompting-u-n-calls-for-action-idUSKBN17E1YF>

<sup>125</sup> <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/10/07/will-we-ever-end-violence-against-women.html>

<sup>126</sup> <https://www.persecution.org/2020/01/10/indonesian-activist-charged-highlighting-christian-persecution/>

## 48) Kuwait

**Women: Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Forced divorce, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence – sexual.**

Although there are relatively few Kuwaiti Christians, many of the foreign domestic maids in Kuwait are Christian. This is significant in a country where the foreign population outnumbers the indigenous population. According to Kuwaiti delegates attending a [CEDAW review](#)<sup>127</sup> in 2017, the ill-treatment of migrant workers, including sexual abuse, is a major issue. Statistics on the issue are scarce, as employers of abused maids or the perpetrators of the abuse have no interest in reporting the issues, and the maids themselves are often ashamed because of the abuse and do not want to be seen as "dirty" within their society in Kuwait or by their family at home. Reports indicate that the COVID-19 lockdown has [further intensified](#)<sup>128</sup> the pressures experienced by domestic workers (The Telegraph, 20 October 2020). House maids working in Kuwait often face sexual harassment or slave-like treatment. The ill treatment of migrant workers, including sexual abuse, has become a high-profile issue at the international level. Although not primarily faith-related, many Christian domestic migrant workers, almost all of whom are female, experience sexual abuse.

According to [Chatham House](#)<sup>129</sup>, the passing of a new family protection law is “a major step forward for a country which has long suffered from high levels of domestic abuse.” (Chatham House, 16 September 2020). Time is needed however to see how effective implementation of this law is in practice. For now, experts are concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on domestic violence levels.

Native Kuwaiti Christian women of Muslim background will encounter severe family pressure to reject their new faith. They may be put under house arrest, pressurized to marry a Muslim or sexually harassed (although there have been no reported instances of forced marriage in the WWL 2021 reporting period). Women may also be threatened with the possibility of honor killings to restore the honor of the family following her conversion. If already married, female converts are vulnerable to being divorced by their husbands. Perhaps the most difficult law for Christian converts hoping to establish their own Christian household is that women from a Muslim background are restricted by [law](#)<sup>130</sup> from marrying a non-Muslim (IOC, Prohibition of Interfaith Marriage).

**Men:  
Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion.**

<sup>127</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=22341&LangID=E>

<sup>128</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/climate-and-people/want-leave-scared-pandemic-increases-risk-violence-gulfs-domestic/>

<sup>129</sup> <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/09/kuwait-brighter-future-beckons-domestic-violence-sufferers>

<sup>130</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/marriage/interfaith-prohibition.php#kuwait>

Among the small number of Kuwaiti converts to Christianity, most pressure comes from family and community – these would typically be felt most keenly by women and girls, followed by younger men, followed by older men. This reflects levels of status and freedom generally within the culture.

In Kuwait, men who convert to Christianity fear the rejection of their immediate and extended families and the repercussions that would have on their livelihood. In this Islamic society, male converts are likely to be ostracized by their families, simultaneously losing their respect and their financial support. Often, this means that Christian men or boys are forced to leave the family home. Without family support, it is difficult for men to find or keep their job and marrying becomes almost impossible. Christian men are especially subject to discrimination and hostilities on the work-floor. The isolation of conversion is further amplified by the difficulty that converts from a Muslim background have in forming sustainable church groups.

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## 49) Kenya

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Denied/restricted healthcare, Discrimination/harassment via education, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

In the Muslim-majority regions of Kenya, Christian women and girls face multiple forms of persecution. Though the Constitution fully establishes gender equality, cultural practices in some tribes (such as funeral rites, FGM, early marriage and polygamy) leave Christian women at greater risk of persecution if they oppose these practices. In addition, a lack of effective implementation of the Constitution has caused growing dissatisfaction among the Kenyan population. David Marage, Kenya's Chief Justice, recently [stated](#)<sup>131</sup>: "In my view the constitution of Kenya is one of the best constitutions in the world, if only we could implement it." (BBC News, 30 August 2020).

In the northern regions, Christian women and girls continue to face harassment and social rejection. Women and girls are forced to comply with an Islamic dress code. If they fail to do so they could be asked to leave their school, harassed and threatened. Women even encounter discrimination in hospitals. Pregnant women in maternity wards have reportedly been neglected by Muslim medical practitioners in the country of Wajir, endangering the life of both the mother and baby. In addition, female Christians report that they are more vulnerable to sexual harassment and rape. In the most extreme instances, they may be killed for their faith.

Female converts to Christianity from Islam face a great variety of forms of pressure. The first measures taken are to isolate them from Christian community and put them under house arrest. If

<sup>131</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-53935125>

married, they risk being denied custody of their children and divorced. If single, they face the likelihood of a forced marriage – usually to a much older Muslim man.

In extreme circumstances, northern Kenyan women have been kidnapped by al-Shabaab fighters and forced to be sex slaves or wives. These women are reportedly given contraceptives so that they can be gang raped repeatedly without becoming pregnant, and only those who convert to Islam and marry commanders are [allowed to have children](#)<sup>132</sup> (The Standard, 23 December 2017).

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied inheritance or possessions, Imprisonment by government, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

Christian boys and men in the north-eastern region in particular face the greatest danger of physical assault and execution at the hands of radical Muslims and al-Shabaab. Whilst instances are rare, men are also more likely than women to be imprisoned for their faith. Men and boys also face the threat of isolation and societal condemnation when they go against the cultural norms. Those who oppose negative cultural practices in some tribes (such as funeral rites, FGM, early marriages and polygamy) suffer varying levels of persecution. Their families are not accepted in the community as they are considered 'cursed' or 'not real men' (if they opt for hospital circumcision). Converts from a Muslim background may be denied their inheritance rights, putting them in a weak financial position. As men are the main providers in Kenya, this also affects the wider family.

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## 50) Comoros

**Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied inheritance or possessions, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Many Comorian families traditionally have matrilineal inheritance, giving women a good deal of influence in the home that can often serve as a buffer against persecution. Nevertheless, female converts from Islam experience serious difficulties due to their conversion and are kept under close family scrutiny. Women and girls who convert to Christianity before they have received their inheritance face the danger of being disinherited for their faith. This leaves them at a financial disadvantage, leading to poverty and distress. In addition to being shunned, there is the possibility that they will be forced into marrying a Muslim in order to pressure them to return to Islam. A married woman who converts can be divorced for her faith. In some instances, husbands have been largely accepting of their new-found faith, although they have then come under huge pressure from their family and local community to initiate a divorce. One female convert shared her experience: “When I told him, he accepted my faith but warned me to keep it secret so that others do not know. He does not tell me about all the pressure to divorce me, but I know that

<sup>132</sup> <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001263935/women-turned-into-sex-slaves-by-militants-in-alshabaab-camps>

there are people who ask him questions. Recently he was dared to divorce me to prove that he has not joined me in Christianity... this was by my father!”

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied food or water, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced divorce, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Male converts in Comoros are often dependent upon their extended families and lack independence. Comoros is a matriarchal society in which the cultural norm is for a married man to move in with his in-laws. In this situation, the family has the means to exert a great deal of pressure upon a convert to return to Islam. They are denied equal treatment in the home, verbally abused, and in some cases, occasionally denied food. Often their wife is put under pressure to divorce them and expel them from their home. In rare instances male converts have faced such extreme pressures and threats that they have fled to another town for safety.

Christian men also experience discrimination in the workplace. Employers favor Muslims and as such many Christians are out of work. In addition, because of high corruption levels in public service, most employees pay a bribe to get into positions, a practice that Christians are not willing to condone.

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## 51) Cuba

**Women:**

**Denied/restricted healthcare, Imprisonment by government, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

According to a [recent IACHR report](#)<sup>133</sup>, the Cuban legal framework has not incorporated into its legislation a definition of discrimination against women and there are legislative gaps concerning domestic and intrafamily violence (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Feb 2020, “Human rights situation in Cuba”, p.123). Lacking data restricts comprehensive analysis, but [reports](#)<sup>134</sup> indicate that domestic violence has worsened in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (REDAMU, 14 May 2020). While the government has set up a helpline for victims, civil society organizations have noted that women not related to the regime are [less likely](#)<sup>135</sup> to receive help (Demoamlat, “Una mirada a la situación de los derechos de la mujer cubana”). Women involved in activism are typically fired from their job, threatened and monitored. For example, police [continue to mistreat](#)<sup>136</sup> and beat the ‘Ladies in White’ - a group of women founded by the relatives of political prisoners - on their way to and from Sunday church services (Human Rights Watch. “Cuba, Events of 2020”). In addition to beatings, members have also been arrested and detained for short periods of time.

<sup>133</sup> <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/reports/pdfs/Cuba2020-en.pdf>

<sup>134</sup> <https://redamu.org/351/>

<sup>135</sup> <https://www.demoamlat.com/una-mirada-a-la-situacion-de-los-derechos-de-la-mujer-cubana/>

<sup>136</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/cuba>

Christian women and girls are often insulted because of their more conservative sexual values. In Cuba, abortion has been legal and free for a long time and is presented as being a normal contraceptive method. This situation has also influenced the [decline](#)<sup>137</sup> in birth rates in the country (World Bank Data, accessed 15 February 2021). Abortions are obligatory in the case of genetic malformation, in line with the Cuban government's ideal of maintaining a 0% rate of births with deformities. This is a major challenge for Christian women wishing to remain loyal to their Christian beliefs. Refusal may be regarded as an act of opposition towards the government.

Due to the historical repression of religion in Cuba, especially Christianity, it is challenging for women to form stable families. As a country expert explains, “there is a common consciousness or rather, a lack of common awareness about the behaviours that respond to true moral values. That is why, for example, abortion, sexual exploitation and prostitution are realities that have normalized on the island”.

**Men:**

**Denied access to Christian religious materials, Denied inheritance or possessions, Discrimination/ harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

National service is compulsory for men. If it is discovered that they are active Christians or have Christian parents, the level of discrimination and persecution depends on the attitude of the commanding officer. Although alternative forms of social service are theoretically possible, in practice permission is rarely granted. Also, given the economic difficulties resulting from state policies and US sanctions, many men must work abroad in order to meet family needs.

Christian men are generally more likely to be arrested or to be harassed since they are more likely to hold leadership positions from which they criticize government behavior based on their Christian beliefs. In October 2019, religious activist [Dagoberto Valdés Hernández](#)<sup>138</sup>, director of the Centre for Coexistence Studies (CEC), was missing for several days after the car in which he was traveling to Havana was intercepted by the Police. He was held in the State Security office but without any type of legal order or communication with his family (CiberCuba, 18 October 2019). Members of the Christian Liberation Movement are also continuously besieged and threatened.

Pastors also come under close scrutiny from the regime. They face beatings, arrests, confiscation of Christian literature, destruction of property and death threats. Children of activists or pastors are also vulnerable and may face mistreatment from their teachers, who tell them that their parents are a bad example. They are also little accepted amongst their peers. One country expert describes the dynamics for men and boys in Cuba as follows: “Christian men and boys in Cuba are beaten, adults physically, children in the soul”.

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<sup>137</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=CU>

<sup>138</sup> <https://www.cibercuba.com/noticias/2019-10-18-u1-e129488-s27061-paradero-desconocido-activista-religioso-cubano-dagoberto>

## 52) Sri Lanka

### Women:

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied inheritance or possessions, Forced divorce, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Whilst Sri Lanka has made recent [positive steps](#)<sup>139</sup> to address the protection of women (such as establishing an Office on missing persons and an Office for Reparations), the risk of sexual violence remains high in Sri Lanka and perpetrators frequently enjoy impunity (Report of the UN Secretary General, June 2020, "Conflict-Related Sexual Violence", p.42). Sexual assault is a weapon used against all women, regardless of religion. For a Christian woman however, she has double vulnerability because of her faith. Being the victim of sexual violence is considered to be a source of shame both for the woman and her family, and impacts her prospects for marriage. When Christian women and girls - not just converts - have already been subjected to this kind of persecution, their families are more reluctant to allow them out for any church related work again. In recent years there have been few reported cases of rape, but sexual harassment has remained an ongoing issue. For example, in January 2020 a group of Christians on their way to church were accosted by a large group of villagers led by eight Buddhist monks. The mob threatened the group in obscene language, took photographs (especially of the female congregants) and physically assaulted one female.

One of the most common forms of persecution that affects female converts to Christianity is house arrest and/or isolation. One convert described her experiences: "My mother does not allow my younger siblings to visit me and my husband. Even when I talk to them over the phone, I won't get to speak for long because my parents are afraid they too will convert." Another young woman from Ampara shared: "My parents don't let me go to church. I had to tell them I was going to the bank for them to allow me to go out on my own. If I say I am going to the church they will never allow it."

Female converts have also reportedly lost their inheritance rights. This is due to the fact that family members view Christianity as a foreign religion and consider converts to have betrayed their family, traditions and culture. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable in light of Sri Lanka's patriarchal society. One Sri Lankan Christian shared this insight into the impact of the patriarchy: "When a man converts, he changes many of the bad habits in his life. When people see that, they say that he has become a good person. But when girls convert and take a stand in their faith in the midst of opposition from their family, that girl will then be seen as having grown stubborn and disobedient to her family. This is because women cannot make decisions on their own." In light of this, many female converts find it more difficult to follow their faith than new male converts and overcome the verbal harassment they receive from their families and communities. On rare occasions, they may even be divorced by their husband due to their conversion.

<sup>139</sup> <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/report/conflict-related-sexual-violence-report-of-the-united-nations-secretary-general/2019-SG-Report.pdf>

**Men:**

**Denied inheritance or possessions, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Christian leaders often bear the brunt of attacks against a church. As men are often at the forefront, they are the victims of physical attack and threats most often. Pastors and Christian leaders (and their family members) who have a ministry or church in Sinhalese dominated areas are frequently targeted and harassed by Buddhist monks and villagers for faith related reasons. In the WWL 2021 reporting period there have been several incidents where pastors have reported facing pressure and violence. One pastor was beaten coming out of a prayer meeting, together with his son and daughter-in-law. In April 2020 a pastor went to visit widowed congregants to enquire after their wellbeing. When returning, he was stopped at a checkpoint by Army personnel who asked where he was going. He said he was a pastor and that he was visiting some congregants and was allowed to proceed. Two young men who were standing by the checkpoint began to follow him. They threatened him in obscene language and by brandishing sticks. They allegedly called Criminal Investigation Department (CID) officers who came to question him. Other pastors have been targeted and intimidated in their own homes. Sri Lanka is a male-dominated, patriarchal society. As such, when a male gets physically assaulted, it would also create a sense of shame within rural close-knit communities.

The persecution of men and boys particularly affects the livelihood of Christian families. Especially in rural communities, males are the financial providers of the family, so losing a job or livelihood financially affects the whole Christian family and creates fear. It is mostly men who experience verbal harassment in the workplace. Reports indicate that businesses have been damaged and that Christian men have been denied jobs.

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## 53) United Arab Emirates (UAE)

**Women:**

**Denied access to Christian religious materials, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Forced divorce, Imprisonment by government, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

In general, women are vulnerable in the UAE, as [domestic violence](#)<sup>140</sup> and marital rape are permitted without legal consequence (OECD, 2019, “Social Institutions and Gender Index: UAE”). Indeed, UAE is highlighted by the Georgetown [Women, Peace and Security Index](#)<sup>141</sup> as having one of the most extensive discriminatory legal systems against women in the world (Georgetown, 2020, p.3). Tribal society regards women as ‘inferior’ members of society in need of male guardianship and this also affects the level of persecution experienced by female converts from Islam to Christianity.

<sup>140</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/AE.pdf>

<sup>141</sup> <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>

A female convert to Christianity will face immense pressure from her family to force her to convert back to Islam. If she does not, an imam may be called in to convince her of her sin, or she could be placed under house arrest, or sent to a psychiatric hospital. Even if a Christian man were willing to marry her, women who come from a Muslim background are [legally restricted](#)<sup>142</sup> from marrying a non-Muslim (James Berry, 5 February 2017, ‘Overview of Mixed Marriages and the Law in the UAE’). Furthermore, a Christian man and a convert woman cannot simply have a Christian wedding ceremony outside the law. Since Islam does not consider marriage between a non-Muslim man and a Muslim woman valid, both parties to such a union would be subject to arrest, trial, and imprisonment on grounds of engaging in an extramarital relationship, which carries a minimum of one year in prison.

Furthermore, for Christian women who are married to a Muslim man, the law grants custody of children of non-Muslim women to the Muslim father in the event of a divorce. By law, a non-Muslim woman who fails to convert is also ineligible for naturalization as a citizen and [cannot inherit](#)<sup>143</sup> her husband’s property unless named as a beneficiary in his will ([OECD](#), 2019)<sup>144</sup>.

Housemaids working in the UAE often face sexual harassment or slave-like treatment. The ill treatment of migrant workers, including sexual abuse, has become a high-profile issue at the international level. Although not primarily faith-related, many Christian domestic migrant workers, almost all of whom are female, experience (sexual) abuse.

**Men:**  
**Denied access to social community/networks, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country.**

In the UAE, men who convert to Christianity are likely to be abandoned by their families and treated as shameful social outcasts. He is very likely to lose custody of his children and his wife may divorce him. Familial rejection is not only an emotional blow felt by converts, it also represents a loss of social standing. Without the financial support of their families or the necessary connections to find or maintain a job, it is extremely difficult to find employment in this network-based society. This has major implications for all his family members since men are traditionally the family providers. Furthermore, without a family and the accompanying social status, a man will be unable to find a family willing to give their daughter permission to marry him. These pressures cause some men to leave the UAE in search of greater freedom.

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## 54) Niger

**Women:**  
**Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

<sup>142</sup> <https://jamesberrylaw.com/news-details/1073/overview-of-mixed-marriages-and-the-law-in-the-uae>

<sup>143</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/AE.pdf>

<sup>144</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/AE.pdf>

Niger’s society is heavily patriarchal; it is one of just three countries in the world where married women require permission from their husband to open a [bank account](#)<sup>145</sup> (Georgetown, “Women Peace and Security Index 2019/20”, p.34). It has the [highest rate of child marriage](#)<sup>146</sup> in the world, with 76% of girls being married by the age of 18 (IDRC/CRDI, March 2017). This is in part due to [wide-scale poverty, food shortages and escalating violence](#)<sup>147</sup> (Plan International, 2018, “Adolescent Girls in Crisis”).

Like many other countries in the Sahel, females are particularly vulnerable to abduction, rape and sexual abuse by extremist groups and others. A country expert notes further: “Our culture is hiding this aspect of persecution.” Families do not report instances of rape as it will impact the marriage prospects of the victim and is viewed as a source of shame. In the WWL 2021 reporting period, a Christian girl was raped by a policeman at Tillaberi, further highlighting why Christian families might be reluctant to report crimes. More broadly, many Christian girls also face sexual harassment and discriminatory remarks for failing to wear the hijab.

Additionally, Christian women in Niger are affected by living under Sharia. For example, according to Sharia law, a Christian woman has no right to claim custody of her children in divorce cases, even though Niger is a secular country. Converts to Christianity can face extreme hostility from their families and local communities. They can be divorced, denied custody of their children, forced into marriage with a Muslim man and raped. Christian parents can by law apply for custody of the children, but in practice, Christian parents fail to succeed. Many have also been denied their inheritance rights because of their conversion to Christianity. Christians are often unaware of their [legal options](#)<sup>148</sup> to defend their rights (OECD, 2019, “Social Institutions and Gender Index: Niger”) but when the case is taken to court, the problem is often settled satisfactorily.

**Men:**

**Abduction, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Imprisonment by government, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence – physical.**

Converts to Christianity can face the most severe forms of persecution, as conversion from Islam to any religion is considered a betrayal by some families. They may be rejected by their families, chased out of their family home, or put under house arrest. Highlighting the psychological impact of such pressures, a country expert shared: “On many occasions, we heard stories of converts losing their mind because of long detention in isolation.”

There is another phenomenon in Niger - although not specifically a form of targeted religious persecution - which affects all communities and has a strong negative impact on Christian families: Boys in Niger are subject to recruitment as child soldiers. There is high potential for boys to be abducted and forced to join the ranks of militant groups, or physically harmed during raids. Since African communities are community-centered, this situation can harm all families in a community.

<sup>145</sup> <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>

<sup>146</sup> <https://beta.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/864/rapport-NIGER.pdf>

<sup>147</sup> <https://plan-international.org/publications/adolescent-girls-crisis>

<sup>148</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/NE.pdf>

Christian men in Niger can also face dismissal from their jobs because of their faith, or have their business boycotted by the Muslim community. As men and boys are usually the financial providers, this leaves his family vulnerable and exposed.

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## 55) Kyrgyzstan

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied inheritance or possessions, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

While laws in Kyrgyzstan give equal rights to men and women, traditional Islamic culture places women at a level subservient to men within the family context. According to [UN Women](#)<sup>149</sup> (accessed 16 January 2020), “the country still suffers from high and rising inequalities and faces major regional disparities. Women are largely excluded from decision-making. Violence against women is widespread and takes many forms, including domestic violence, [bride kidnapping](#)<sup>150</sup>, trafficking, early marriages and physical abuse. The negative reinterpretation of some cultural and social practices increasingly restricts women’s rights to control their lives.” (CSCE, 29 August 2017).

Within this context, women are not free to choose their own religion and will face persecution upon conversion to Christianity. The tight structure of society means that conversely, women are also targeted for persecution as a means of inflicting psychological harm on their husbands or other family members. Over the years, Christian women and girls have been known to suffer from verbal and physical abuse, threats, beatings, detention, interrogation, imprisonment, discrimination, home detention, forced marriage, family violence and rape. Exemplifying the pressures converts face from their families, one woman was given an ultimatum by her Muslim relatives – renounce Jesus or leave. She chose to flee her home and village. Others are tolerated but blamed for bad events such as the death of a family member, which they argue is caused because they betrayed their native faith.

As noted in previous years, Kyrgyzstan has a long tradition of bride-stealing; in rural areas, female converts in conservative regions run the risk of being kidnapped and married off to a Muslim. Female converts from a Muslim background are also subject to house-arrest by their families as a common and socially accepted form of putting female converts under pressure. Access to social networks, specifically Christian networks, is restricted in the hope that the convert will return to Islam. With the same aim to force women back to Islam, female converts in conservative regions run the risk of being abducted and forcibly married to Muslim men. If already married at the point of conversion, Muslim husbands commonly divorce their wives and deny them access to their possessions.

<sup>149</sup> <http://https://eca.unwomen.org/en/where-we-are/kyrgyzstan>

<sup>150</sup> <https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/bride-kidnapping-kyrgyz-republic>

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied communal resources, Denied inheritance or possessions, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Economic harassment via fines, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Male converts to Christianity face various forms of pressure and violence from family members and their local community. Over the years, Christian men and boys have been known to suffer from verbal and physical abuse, threats, beatings, arrest, interrogation, fines, imprisonment, job loss, discrimination, home detention, divorce, disinheritance, and exclusion from participation in communal institutions.

Kyrgyz Christian men are most at risk when they are church and family leaders. When a businessman is known to be a Christian, the community may boycott or hinder his business. Men are usually the heads of their families and the main bread winners, so when a Christian man loses his job or business because of his Christian faith, his whole family will suffer. When churches are raided, it is mostly church leaders who are detained, interrogated and fined. Muslims will hold church leaders primarily responsible for the conversion of their people. There have been instances where Kyrgyz Christian leaders could no longer continue with their ministry because their (non-church) business was attacked. The persecution of a church leader (usually male) impacts the wider congregation, instilling fear and anxiety.

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## 56) Palestinian Territories

**Women:**

**Denied access to Christian religious materials, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Enforced religious dress code, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

In the Palestinian Territories, male heads of household consider the choices and behavior of the women in their care to be deeply reflective of their leadership and personal honor. As such, women who stray beyond the culturally acceptable confines are at risk of retribution from their families. An [Amnesty International report](#)<sup>151</sup> has once again highlighted the suspected use of so-called “honor killings” - mainly by male relatives - revealing the precarious position of women in this patriarchal society (Amnesty International, Palestine [State of] 2019). This threat can be used to put pressure on women wishing to convert to Christianity. There is a strong sense of shame related to conversion from Islam; this has a significant practical impact on women and girls in particular because of their greater dependency within the family. Thus, they are more vulnerable to persecution from the family or close society, particularly in light of [insufficient legislation](#)<sup>152</sup> addressing domestic violence and violence against women (UNFPA and UNDP, 2019, Gender Justice and the Law: Palestine).

<sup>151</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/middle-east-and-north-africa/palestine-state-of/report-palestine-state-of/>

<sup>152</sup> <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Palestine%20Country%20Summary%20-%20English.pdf>

Family members can almost always act without impunity against female converts. If the younger generation has chosen to leave Islam, families may turn to physical violence and forced confinement (house arrest) in order to persuade them to return. This is more often used for girls as the family cannot expel them like they can boys. As a country expert explained: "The family will try to hide the shame. Young women are more vulnerable than men and can more easily 'disappear' for a season." If unmarried, female converts may also be pressured into a marriage with a Muslim – it is difficult to determine how 'forced' these marriages are, but certainly there is a pressurizing element at play."

Christian girls and women are sometimes looked down upon by their Muslim neighbors (e.g. for not wearing a veil in public). Although not forced upon them by the government, there is a socially enforced dress code for Christian women, requiring them to cover themselves in public, except for their heads. They are also vulnerable to online harassment and abuse.

**Men:**

**Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Violence - physical, Violence - verbal.**

Palestinian men who convert to Christianity face a variety of forms of pressure and violence. Young male converts are harassed, threatened and usually forced out of the family home. The Christian community struggles to accommodate these needy and often lonely individuals. It is also challenging for these men to marry a Christian, as both families will likely oppose the match. Such weddings would need to take place in secret and are rare.

As men are usually the main financial providers in Palestinian families, job discrimination against men serves to weaken the whole family. Some Christian men from a Muslim background have reportedly been exploited in the workplace and lost jobs on the basis of their faith. As Palestinians operate in a context of Israeli dominance, this and the dire economic situation can make Christian men in general feel powerless. As one country researcher wrote: The "lack of money leads to low self-esteem and arguments in families." Many Christian men want to leave the Palestinian Territories to find a job abroad and escape life under occupation. 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.

Church leaders in Palestine (usually men) are also reported to face verbal abuse, including from ultra-orthodox Jews. Others have received threats and on rare occasion been killed.

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## 57) Tanzania

**Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied communal resources, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced to flee town/country, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Targeted seduction, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

Christian women in Tanzania face hostility both through subtle and violent means. In past years, this has included being denied access to communal resources such as community wells, being pressured to dress according to an Islamic dress code, and being verbally harassed. In March 2020 an elderly Christian widow was raped and killed in the Dodoma region on her way to morning prayer at her church. The culprits were believed to be African Traditional Religion (ATR) practitioners; in the area ATR belief is strong in Gogo tribal society. As a regional expert explained, some believe that having sexual intercourse with an elderly woman will make that person rich, since she is viewed as being chaste.

Additionally, Christian women are sometimes seduced by Muslim men who pretend to be evangelical Christians, with the intent of coercing them to recant their Christian faith. Furthermore, there is coercion to accept negative cultural practices such as widow inheritance in Mwanza, female genital mutilation, polygamous unions and early child marriages among the Maasai.

Women in Kigoma region have been subjected to sexual violence over the past years. The attackers – known locally as [Teleza](#)<sup>153</sup>, which refers to the fact that they cover themselves in oil – typically break into the homes of women in the night. They are often armed and threaten violence, sometimes leaving the survivors with life-threatening injuries (African Arguments, 10 June 2019). Women who have been subjected to this violence are afraid to speak out as the community then isolates them or they are subjected to social stigma, branded as prostitutes. Initially, these men only targeted single women, almost as though they wanted to punish them for not adhering to the norms of society by getting married. However, now even married women are being targeted, with women as old as 70 also being attacked. The attacks are centered around a need to control women. In some locations, this affects Christians more than others. It is unclear to what extent these attacks are still happening due to a lack of reporting.

Female converts to Christianity face the most intense persecution. They continue to face the prospect of forced marriage, forced divorce, isolation from their families and the denial of their inheritance and custody rights. One reported case exemplifies the situation of a female convert to Christianity: She left Islam to become a Christian in December 2019 and fled her home after her father tried to force her to marry a Muslim man. Together with her sister, she sought protection from a church.

Due to such religious persecution, Christian Tanzanian women are often demoralized, traumatized and consequently unable to work effectively. This is reported to have a negative economic impact on the wider Tanzanian Church, as many women are unable to contribute.

**Men:**  
**Denied citizenship, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Enforced religious dress code, Imprisonment by government, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Christian men in Tanzania encounter discrimination and segregation in the workplace, particularly in Muslim companies. Their wages may be cut, and their overtime allowances may go unpaid. In addition, they are forced to observe prayers during official prayer times and are commonly targeted by Muslims who wish to convert them. These pressures at work place an economic

<sup>153</sup> <https://africanarguments.org/2019/06/tanzania-strange-worrying-rise-oil-covered-rapists-kigoma-teleza/>

burden on Christian men, as well as their families for whom they are the primary provider. The wider Tanzanian Church is further impacted, as without funds it struggles economically. It is also weakened in terms of attendance, as many men struggle to attend due to working hours.

Christian converts are affected by cultural and ethnic factors, particularly if from tribal backgrounds. If a Maasai warrior converts to Christianity, for example, and changes his hair from the traditional style, the tribal leaders (whose role is to preserve the culture of the tribe) often regard this act as a form of betrayal. Punishment may include physical harm with traditional weapons such as spears and arrows. Similarly, converts from a Muslim background will face harsh treatment and reprisals. One convert recently stopped attending church because of the death threats he was receiving from his family.

Church leaders are also targeted for the purpose of religious persecution. In the WWL 2021 reporting period there have been reports of church leaders being detained, particularly those who have been vocal in any way against the ruling party. Pastors also experience verbal harassment, threats and physical attacks, particularly at the hands of radical Muslims. A small number of bishops have also reportedly been denied their citizenship.

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## 58) Russian Federation

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

The most vulnerable Christian women in Russia are converts from a Muslim background. In Russia's Muslim regions, daily life is based on Islamic culture which gives women inferior status. Traditional culture based on Islamic teaching puts women lower than men and requires obedience and [submission to men](#)<sup>154</sup> in the family (CEDAW, 2015, "Concluding Observations on the Eighth Periodic Report of the Russian Federation"). For that reason, a woman cannot freely choose her own religion and will be persecuted if she converts to Christianity. If her faith is discovered, she may face verbal and physical abuse, house arrest and threats. In the northern Caucasus (and to a lesser extent in the mid-Volga regions) converts also run the risk of being kidnapped and married off to a Muslim, particularly if premarital arrangements were made prior to the conversion.

Christian women are vulnerable to physical beatings and/or rape. Specific reports are rare however, as women are not likely to disclose such information even to closest family; sexual assault is considered shameful and impairs marriage prospects. A married Christian woman may experience beatings from her husband and he can divorce her because of her faith. The law gives equal rights to men and women in general, although the laws regarding domestic abuse are

<sup>154</sup>

<http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2FPPRiCAqhKb7yhsnINnqKYBbHCTOaqVs8CBP2%2FEJgS2uWhk7nuL22CY5Q6EygEUW%2BboviXGrJ6B4KEJr4JalKJZyYib0P1wYeg13mjbpxpvgBQIHs8SaZvXdxjX>

considered to be [insufficient](#)<sup>155</sup> (OECD, 2019, “Social Institutions and Gender Index: Russian Federation”).

Those leaving the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to join another Christian denomination also face challenges from the community they were once a part of. They are typically excommunicated and isolated (particularly if they marry outside of the ROC), which can traumatize Christian women.

**Men:**

**Abduction, Denied communal resources, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Economic harassment via fines, Imprisonment by government, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

The many forms of discrimination and persecution faced by Christian men in Russia mainly affect Christians from a Muslim background in the predominantly Muslim regions. They may be threatened, beaten, verbally harassed and denied access to communal platforms. Men are considered the heads of their families and are also usually the main financial providers; this means that when a Christian man loses his job due to persecution for his faith, his whole family will suffer. Businesses whose owners are Christians may also experience occasional problems. For example, more frequent visits from officials are not uncommon (e.g. from fire-brigades, health departments etc.).

Men also experience economic pressure through being forced to pay fines and being imprisoned. The State regards non-Russian Orthodox pastors and church leaders (mostly men) as primary targets to make a strong impression on the wider Christian community. When churches are raided, it is mostly the leaders who are detained, interrogated and fined. This often has a negative effect on whole congregations and can result in fear spreading among church members. In a rare instance in December 2019, German pastor [Helmut Beringer](#)<sup>156</sup> was denied his permanent residency and ordered to leave the country within 15 days, allegedly 'for opposing the Russian Orthodox Church' (Russian Union of Evangelical Christian – Baptist, 13 Dec 2019). Others have been charged with 'distributing religious literature' and 'carrying out unspecified missionary activity'.

Due to the growth of patriotism in Russia (partly based on militarism and the memory of the Great Patriotic War - the Russian name for their involvement in WWII), it has become popular for young men to serve in the armed forces. Christians who choose community service as an alternative to military service risk being discriminated against.

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<sup>155</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/RU.pdf>

<sup>156</sup> <https://baptist.org.ru/en/news/view/article/1535155>

## 59) Djibouti

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Those who are found to be converts in Djibouti face harsh treatment. Female converts in Djibouti are vulnerable to physical beatings and house arrest (particularly in rural areas). Although not common, reports indicate that in some instances, Christian women have been abducted by radical Muslims and forced to marry Muslims without their consent. The majority of those who enter coerced marriages do so under pressure from their families and local communities who are eager to see them return to Islam. No specific incidents have been reported in the past year, but this form of persecution remains a live threat.

Converts who are already married face various forms of pressure from their spouse and extended families. If a newly Christian woman refuses to recant her new-found faith, she will likely face divorce. Whilst men in poverty-ridden Djibouti would normally want to escape the burden of looking after the children in a case of divorce, sources state that families of devoted Muslims will not allow the woman to claim custody and raise the children as Christians. Whether they succeed in claiming custody rights or not, female converts are usually crippled financially without a stable income and by the denial of inheritance rights.

The wife is a pivotal member of the family unit in Djibouti, with women playing a major role in raising children and representing the family at societal events. The persecution of women and girls therefore has a significant negative impact on the wider family and community.

### **Men:**

**Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Violence - physical, Violence - verbal.**

Although limited data is available, Christian men in Djibouti are at risk of physical attack, verbal harassment and intimidation. Many are forced out of their homes, leaving them displaced and economically vulnerable. Others pay an even greater price and have reportedly been killed on faith-related grounds in the past (although there are no recent incidents of killing). As men are typically the bread-winners in Djibouti, their absence throws the family into emotional and financial turmoil. It also compromises the family's physical security, particularly in remote parts of the country, as a husband/father's absence could lead to looting of the family property and sexual attacks on his wife and daughters.

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## 60) Bahrain

### **Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Enforced religious dress code, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Women have been granted greater legal equality in Bahrain through the passage of the [2017 Unified Family Law](#)<sup>157</sup> (EGIC, “Women in the Gulf”). However, women and girls continued to be [viewed as inferior](#)<sup>158</sup> in Bahraini society; it is very unlikely to see women in power (Wilson Center, 8 March 2020). Among the small number of converts to Christianity, pressure is most keenly felt by women and girls, followed by younger men, then older men (reflecting levels of status and freedom within the culture). Women must dress like Muslim women to avoid harassment and discrimination.

A key challenge that women from a Muslim background experience is the legal marriage restriction that prevents them from marrying a non-Muslim; only Muslim men are permitted to marry a non-Muslim. A marriage between a formerly (and still officially registered) Muslim woman who has converted to Christianity to a non-Muslim will [not be recognized](#)<sup>159</sup> (Article 11 of Law No.19, 2009). If a Christian woman is married to a Muslim man, her custody and inheritance rights will also [not be considered](#)<sup>160</sup> (OECD, Social Institutions and Gender Index, Bahrain, 2019).

In addition to these challenges, female converts face oppression from their families. They are prevented from cultivating Christian fellowship, placed under house arrest, and may be threatened with honor killing (although no such cases have been reported in the WWL 2021 reporting period).

The ill-treatment of foreign workers, including sexual abuse, remains a major issue. House maids working in Bahrain often face sexual harassment or slave-like treatment. The ill treatment of migrant workers, including sexual abuse, has become a high-profile issue at the international level. Although not primarily faith-related, many Christian domestic migrant workers, almost all of whom are female, experience (sexual) abuse. More broadly, there is also pressure to adhere to Islamic style of dress in order to avoid harassment.

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Imprisonment by government, Violence – psychological.**

Persecution of Christian convert men in Bahrain typically manifests itself in the workplace. Men may lose out on promotion, or in some instances, lose their jobs altogether. There are also reports of Christians being detained (often for blasphemy charges) or receiving fines. Both result in serious economic hardship which has major implications on the whole family, as the man is normally the financial provider of the family. Converts may also be ostracized from their families, threatened, intimidated and expelled from the family home. Their status and role in the family will come under threat. In light of these pressures, it is extremely challenging for believers from a Muslim background to meet for fellowship.

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<sup>157</sup> [https://dfc81d0a-7e5a-4387-8fb9-37f328cf1d34.filesusr.com/ugd/12afd7\\_b6279723dcf54cc686fa0c8f50440105.pdf](https://dfc81d0a-7e5a-4387-8fb9-37f328cf1d34.filesusr.com/ugd/12afd7_b6279723dcf54cc686fa0c8f50440105.pdf)

<sup>158</sup> <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/we-have-achieved-lot-bahrain-we-strive-more>

<sup>159</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/marriage/interfaith-prohibition.php#bahrain>

<sup>160</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/BH.pdf>

## 61) Azerbaijan

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Azerbaijan is a typical Caucasian country where family traditions and rules are very strict, and disobedience to senior family members is unacceptable. Patriarchal norms and discriminatory gender stereotypes remain prevalent and women are expected to remain within the home and prioritize domestic and familial duties ([OECD, Social Institutions and Gender Index, Azerbaijan, 2019](#))<sup>161</sup>. Within this context, women are not free to choose their own religion and will face persecution upon conversion to Christianity. Christian converts (typically from a Muslim background) are therefore most vulnerable to persecution - both as Christians and as women who dare to challenge the existing order. They are at a greater risk than non-converts of experiencing physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats, house arrest, discrimination and rejection by family and Muslim community. Female converts in conservative regions also run the risk of being abducted and forcibly married to Muslim men, with the aim of forcing them to return to Islam.

The tight structure of society means that women are also targeted for persecution as a means of inflicting psychological harm on their husbands or other family members. The persecution of women can cause fear, anxiety and anger.

### **Men:**

**Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Economic harassment via fines, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

In Azerbaijan, male converts from Islam are at a bigger risk than non-converts of experiencing physical and verbal abuse, harassment, threats, discrimination and rejection by family and Muslim community. Known converts will be harassed and interrogated harshly by their family and community and some have been called to the police station for questioning.

Christian men – both converts and non-converts - are targeted for their role as heads of their families and primary financial providers. When a Christian man becomes a target of persecution (possibly losing his job) his whole family will suffer. If he is a church leader (usually men), the fact that he is suffering persecution will affect his church and can result in an increase of fear among church members. As a country expert explained: “The state regards pastors and church leaders as primary targets to control Christian activities. They are used as examples for the other Christians of what may be expected. When churches are raided, it is mostly the church leaders who are detained, interrogated, fined, and sometimes harassed. Muslims will hold church leaders primarily responsible for the conversion of their people; active convert leaders will even be attacked more fiercely.”

<sup>161</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/AZ.pdf>

Christian men are also forced to partake in [mandatory](#)<sup>162</sup> military service (World Population Review, accessed 19 January 2021). With no option for an alternative form of service for conscientious objectors, many men are forced to serve in the army despite their strongly held religiously-based objections to taking an oath or taking up weapons. Furthermore, in connection with those who do serve, there are rumors of deliberate placement of Christian service members in hostile situations in order to give the opportunity to pressure them into converting back to Islam.

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## 62) Chad

### Women:

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Women are subservient to men in Chadian society. Reflecting these norms, Chad remains [one of just three countries](#)<sup>163</sup> in the world where married women require permission from their husband to open a bank account (Georgetown, “Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20”). Within this predominately Islamic, patriarchal context, Christian women are vulnerable both on account of their religion as well as their gender.

Christian women in Chad face both violent and non-violent persecution for their faith. In one instance in the WWL 2021 reporting year, a Catholic woman lost her life in N’Djamena after encouraging a group of young people to abandon their life of crime. One member of the group became so enraged that he killed her, after having first raped her. Christian women are also vulnerable to sexual violence at the hands of Islamic militants. Groups such as Boko Haram have on rare occasions abducted Christian women, raped them and forced them to marry their members. Women and girls who have been raped and consequently impregnated typically suffer ongoing psychological distress and low self-esteem. Traumatized rape victims sometimes view their children as a perpetual reminder of the crime committed against them. Local sources report that the wider society around them, too, is unsympathetic to their plight, viewing them as tarnished.

Converts to Christianity from a Muslim background face strong pressure from their family and local community, the aim being to make them recant. The practice of forced marriage is [widespread across Chad](#)<sup>164</sup>, particularly in rural areas (67% are married by 18. Girls Not Brides). Parents of converts may forcibly marry them to a Muslim, with the aim of restoring them to Islam. Gender-based violence in such marriages is commonly reported. If already married at the point of conversion, the husbands of female converts are often pressured by their families and society to divorce them and deny them access to their children, to punish the ‘unfaithful’ and pressurize them into giving up their Christian faith.

<sup>162</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/countries-with-mandatory-military-service/>

<sup>163</sup> <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/WPS-Index-2019-20-Report.pdf>

<sup>164</sup> <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/chad/>

Women and girls may also find it difficult to access Christian community or attend church services, as they can easily be subjected to house arrest by their family. Some parents will restrict them by more indirect means, loading chores on to them to prevent them from leaving the house. Women and girls may also suffer physical beatings, verbal humiliation, or disinheritance.

**Men:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied inheritance or possessions, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Christian men and boys in Chad are most vulnerable to persecution from Islamic militant groups such as Boko Haram. Some have reportedly been abducted, forced to convert to Islam and forcibly recruited into the ranks of jihadist groups to serve as fighters.

Initiation rituals in the southern regions of the country are also a cause for concern. These [initiation rites](#)<sup>165</sup> usually take place every seven years and reportedly include floggings, sexual indignities, drugging, burning with coals and mock burials (Open Doors USA, 16 August 2018). Christians who do not flee will be forced to participate, and children of pastors will be especially targeted. Pastors who speak out against the dangers of these rituals have historically faced reprisals. In one case in 2018, Christians belonging to a church that had been vocal against the rituals were stripped, whipped and held in the woods until fines were paid. Upon return, these men struggled to look after their family due to the physical and mental trauma experienced. To prevent family disintegration, such men require support and education to reintegrate into Christian community.

In addition, men and boys also face challenges at work, being denied jobs and promotion, and encountering verbal harassment for their faith. This is, in part, due to the fact that they are required to make a [public religious oath](#)<sup>166</sup> in order to attain a job in State offices. Christians are, therefore, hindered from attaining positions of influence and pushed into tighter economic circumstances. Senior military and government positions are dominated by Muslims, and Christians are finding it increasingly difficult to attain such posts.

For male converts, when their conversion has become known, they will be isolated by family and local community. Some have also had their property burnt and damaged, been disinherited and expelled completely from their families. This places them in a difficult economic position.

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<sup>165</sup> <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/take-action/pray/pray-for-church-in-chad-facing-threats-for-protecting-youth-from-deadly-ritual/>

<sup>166</sup> <http://http/www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20190311-chad-civil-servants-refuse-take-oath-office-religious-consitution>

## 63) Nicaragua

### **Women:**

**Violence - physical, Violence – psychological.**

According to a report by the organization 'Catholics for the right to Decide', the year 2020 saw [a rise in femicides](#)<sup>167</sup> - a total of 69 were recorded, representing a steady rise compared to previous years. The majority were from rural areas and over half were killed by their husbands, boyfriends, ex-boyfriends or family members (Confidencial, 20 November 2020). Nicaragua has slid 30 places down on Georgetown's 'Women, Peace and Security Index' from 58 to 88 (Georgetown, 2020). This is linked to women's worsening community safety and rising political unrest.

Ongoing state oppression under President Daniel Ortega has resulted in setbacks in rights and freedoms in Nicaragua, placing women in a condition of extreme vulnerability. Due to a lack of confidence in the justice system, as well as the fear of the spread of COVID-19, many victims have not reported the crimes against them. Perpetrators enjoy impunity, and even those imprisoned for their crimes are often later granted pardons. However, during the COVID-19 crisis, a new [phenomenon](#)<sup>168</sup> emerged on social media networking sites (Connectas, 2020). Young people from across the country shared experiences of being victims of sexual violence to raise awareness and speak out.

Least likely to be granted protection or justice are female dissidents of the regime. Precisely because they are considered enemies of the regime, Christian women – mainly Catholic – can fall into this category. They can easily find themselves at the mercy of criminal groups and allies of the government, who punish them by committing illegal acts against them. For example, in November 2019 five ladies singing outside a church were attacked by police officers and removed from the area. Women protesting through hunger strikes to demand freedom for their children, political prisoners of the regime, have also been targeted.

### **Men:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied food or water, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

According to figures from various organizations, it is particularly men who suffer violent repression by the regime, including killings. For example, the [Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights](#) (ANPDH)<sup>169</sup> reported that in the period April 2018 - September 2019 there were 651 deaths in the context of the protests, of which 613 were men and 27 women. Following on from the protests, the COVID-19 pandemic has placed further pressures on Nicaraguan daily life and resulted in an [increase in criminal activity](#)<sup>170</sup> such as people trafficking (UK Government website, 2 October 2020).

<sup>167</sup> <https://confidencial.com.ni/femicides-rise-in-nicaragua-during-2020/>

<sup>168</sup> <https://www.connectas.org/pandemia-invisible/index.html?p=21106.html>

<sup>169</sup> <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2019/10/05/grupos-de-derechos-humanos-elevaron-a-651-los-muertos-por-la-brutal-represion-del-regimen-de-daniel-ortega/>

<sup>170</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chinandega-residents-in-nicaragua-better-informed-about-covid-19>

Men and boys are, in general, more likely to experience visible forms of persecution than women. This is primarily linked to the roles that men and boys assume. Male youths are more likely to take part in demonstrations demanding the resignation of the president and suffer government retaliation. Additionally, most church leaders (primarily Catholic) or ministry leaders are male. When the government identifies a man associated with a church known for their opposition to the regime, he is more vulnerable to repression, and he will suffer hardships and pressure from state and non-state agents. Priests and parishioners have been taken hostage inside churches, denied water and electricity, verbally abused and physically beaten. Others have been abducted, or imprisoned where they face maltreatment. According to a country expert, “Christian prisoners are related to the ‘opposition’ or ‘terrorists’ and therefore they are more likely to be punished with isolation or no food, among other cruel and inhuman treatment towards the opponents of the regime in Nicaraguan prisons.” In the past year, 5 bishops have reportedly sent priests to different parts of the country for their safety, in light of these ongoing threats.

Exemplifying the dangers facing individuals who speak out against criminal activity in Nicaragua, media reported the [suspected murder](#)<sup>171</sup> of a 17-year-old Catholic youth in September 2020. His body was found bearing signs of violent attack. Days before his death, he had spoken out against recent criminal acts in the country through his Facebook account (Agenzia Fides, 21 September 2020). Considering these pressures, many men feel forced to flee the country, facing the dangers of possible capture by human traffickers and other criminal groups.

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## 64) Burundi

### Women:

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Faith-based persecution compounds and exploits the existing societal pressures on women and girls in Burundi, especially those that arise from the [ongoing conflict situation](#)<sup>172</sup> and from women’s low status in society(BBC News, 24 June 2020, Burundi Country Profile).

In particular, female converts to Christianity face severe pressure for their faith. They may be rejected by their families and husbands, denied their inheritance and possessions, forced into marriage with a Muslim, forcibly divorced, denied custody of their children and in rare instances, put under house arrest. Women are also vulnerable to sexual harassment by their relatives and local community. One country expert also indicates that rape has been utilized as a “teaching tool” by the government.

Christians from a Catholic background who join a Pentecostal church can also suffer repercussions. One believer, whose husband left her upon leaving Catholicism, turned to her new

<sup>171</sup> <http://www.fides.org/en/news/68670->

AMERICA\_NICARAGUA\_New\_surge\_in\_violence\_the\_body\_of\_a\_young\_Catholic\_found%22%20/

<sup>172</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13085064>

church for support: “Church leaders have tried to support the woman,” a country expert explained, “however it will not be enough to sustain her for long.”

**Men:**

**Abduction, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Imprisonment by government, Violence – physical.**

Christian men in Burundi commonly face challenges in the workplace on the basis of their faith. They may also become victims of physical attacks. Upon discovery of their faith, converts are expelled from their homes by families and threatened harshly. Given Burundi’s high unemployment rates, it is challenging for these men to survive economically without the support of the family unit.

In the run up to the 2020 elections, many people were detained. Among them were Christians, particularly vocal pastors who had openly opposed the government. As reported by [Human Rights Watch](#)<sup>173</sup>, authorities in Burundi have “increasingly sought to control churches in the country, warning religious leaders against making critical or “political” statements.” (HRW, Burundi: Events of 2019).

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## 65) Uganda

**Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied food or water, Discrimination/harassment via education, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Targeted seduction, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

According to local sources, women in Uganda are generally viewed as inferior to men. In some tribes, women are not allowed to eat certain foods, such as chicken or eggs, which can lead to [disproportionate malnutrition](#)<sup>174</sup> among women and girls. According to recently published [statistics](#)<sup>175</sup>, 30% of 15- to 49-year-old girls had experienced physical or sexual violence in the previous 12 months (UN Women). Very few rape cases [result in conviction](#)<sup>176</sup>, fostering a culture of impunity (The Guardian, 22 Nov 2018). Within this context, Ugandan Christian women face pressures both on account of their gender, as well as due to their faith.

Christian women and girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse, including rape. There were several reports of sexual violence over the past few years. In one particularly concerning incident, a woman was gang raped by a mob of Muslim men who also disfigured her genitalia. In secondary schools, the number of [gang groups](#)<sup>177</sup> are reported to be rising. Notable groups include the "Virgin Hunters", who particularly target virgin girls or those who are presupposed to be

<sup>173</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/burundi>

<sup>174</sup> [http://http/apjcn.nhri.org.tw/server/Africa/Uganda/Uganda\\_taboos\\_ritual%20food\\_customs.htm](http://http/apjcn.nhri.org.tw/server/Africa/Uganda/Uganda_taboos_ritual%20food_customs.htm)

<sup>175</sup> <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/fr/countries/africa/uganda#1>

<sup>176</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/nov/22/ugandan-courts-hold-special-sessions-to-clear-backlog-of-sexual-violence-cases#:~:text=The%20Ugandan%20police%20crime%20report,600%20are%20still%20being%20investigated>

<sup>177</sup> <https://ugandaradionetwork.net/story/gangs-dominate-secondary-schools-in-mbale-town-survey-?districtId=565>

innocent Christian girls (URNM, 23 October 2019). Sexual attacks leave victims feeling ashamed, embarrassed and unwilling to re-tell their ordeals.

Convert women face intense familial and societal hardships, being subjected to forced marriage, forced divorce, house arrest, imprisonment, domestic violence and abandonment by their families. Forced marriages to Muslims often occur as an attempt to return a convert to Islam. Others are enticed more subtly into marriage by financial incentives or the promise of scholarships. In Bufumbo, Mbale, a Muslim dominated area, boys reportedly elope with Christian girls, impregnate them and eventually force them into marriage. Once in these marriages, women have little power to access fellowship as a Christian.

The impact of the trauma of persecution on women has a wider impact on her family. As one country expert comments, “Children brought up in families where the mother has suffered persecution - especially sexual abuse and violence - tend to be depressed. Several exhibit low self-esteem and are prone to poor decision making. Many of them end up going through the same cycle as their mothers.”

**Men:**

**Abduction, Denied inheritance or possessions, Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Economic harassment via work/job/business, False charges, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Targeted seduction, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Ugandan Christian men face both violent and non-violence challenges for their faith. This includes: travel restrictions, verbal abuse, threats from family members and discrimination in the work place – employees are marginalized and denied promotions unless they convert to Islam. More overtly violent challenges include: physical assault, abduction, imprisonment, domestic violence, and the confiscation of property. Pressures are particularly high in the East of the country.

In recent years, the son of a clergy man was targeted, abducted and nearly sacrificed in a ritual murder, but miraculously survived. Another pastor’s son was abducted and imprisoned in a police cell for three days; this was orchestrated by his mother, a former associate pastor who had converted to Islam and married a top Muslim cleric. She reportedly did this to force her son to convert to Islam, as well as to please her new husband. Church leaders are especially targeted – according to one expert, “the government has been relentless in trying to silence them.” Church leaders have been falsely accused of crimes, physically beaten and threatened. Converts to Christianity, too, face considerable pressure from their families and local communities. They may be forced out of their family home and be completely rejected by their parents.

Whilst women are usually the victims of targeted seduction, the son of a Bishop (and a strong evangelist reaching Muslims) was recently forced to marry a woman who had pretended to be a Christian. She conceived, then revealed herself as a Muslim. She sided with her relatives to force him into marriage with a condition that he must convert to Islam.

Finally, Christian men are commonly affected by enforced participation in traditional ceremonies. Among the Gishu, for example, Christian boys are forced to perform certain rituals during the circumcision rites even when it is against their Christian faith.

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## 66) Guinea

### **Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Discrimination/harassment via education, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

In Guinea, female converts to Christianity are especially vulnerable to persecution. They are at risk of being isolated and cut off from their family. They might additionally be physically beaten, removed from school, placed under house arrest or, in some instances, be forced out of the family home. Confinement can last for long periods of time, in the hope that this will result in them turning their back on Christianity. With the same intent, others are forcibly married to Muslims, particularly in Islamic strongholds such as Labe and Fouta. If already married, female converts face the possibility of being divorced by their husband and being denied custody of their children. Considering such pressure, many converts are economically vulnerable and emotionally damaged. Occasionally converts flee their homes, and indeed Guinea, for safety. In the WWL 2021 reporting period, two such women sought safety in a neighboring country.

Christian women are also affected by cultural and tribal factors; the women's secret society, [Sande](#)<sup>178</sup>, for example, shuns Christian women who have chosen not to join the society on faith-related grounds (Britannica, "Sande: African Secret Society").

Daughters of pastors are also targeted by Muslims for the purpose of marriage. While a Muslim woman cannot marry a Christian man (making female converts further vulnerable to forced marriage to a Muslim), a Muslim man can marry a Christian woman. Indeed, he is encouraged to do so in order to spread Islam.

### **Men:**

**Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Christian converts to Christianity face the greatest challenges for their faith, often being condemned by their families, harshly threatened and forced from their homes and towns. Some are whipped, which brings great shame upon both them as well as their wives. In instances where the husband flees his home to escape such pressure, his wife and children are left in an economically vulnerable position.

<sup>178</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sande>

Additionally, In the same way that Christian women in Guinea face pressure from the female secret-society, Sande, men face persecution from the male secret-society, the [Poro](#)<sup>179</sup> (Britannica, 19 November 2020). Non-members are excluded and looked down upon.

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## 67) Honduras

### **Women:**

**Abduction, Trafficking, Violence - death, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

Irrespective of religion, it is dangerous to be a woman in Honduras. Between January and August 2020, the [Violence Observatory](#)<sup>180</sup> recorded 218 violent deaths and femicides; 138 took place during the months of confinement due to the pandemic (Observatorio de Violencia contra las Mujeres, 2020). [Rape and domestic violence](#)<sup>181</sup> are widespread, although women are slow to report crimes (The Advocates, “Honduras’ Compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Suggested List of Issues Relating to Violence Against Women”). This is, in part, due to a [95% impunity rate](#)<sup>182</sup> (as of 2014) for perpetrators of sexual violence and femicide crimes (UN News, 10 July 2014). In addition to these challenges, increasing numbers of women and girls are fleeing Central America amid [reports](#)<sup>183</sup> that criminal gangs are systematically targeting adolescent girls for sexual enslavement (US Department of State, 2020, “Trafficking in Persons Report,” p.240). However, the majority of migrants fleeing Honduras are men, which means that many households in Honduras are being led by women.

Within this context, Christian women and girls can face additional challenges on the basis of their faith. There have been several reports of teenage daughters of pastors being victims of rape, sexual harassment and coercion to engage in pornographic activities at the hands of [gang members](#)<sup>184</sup> (La Prensa, 05 Mar 2017). These girls are systematically targeted as a means of blackmailing or intimidating their families, in order to stop missional activity occurring in gang territory. Some girls have been abducted and killed for refusing to engage in sexual relationships with gang members. Survivors are left both physically and psychologically traumatized. Women involved in social activism or teaching can also be targeted. In December 2019, teacher Antonia Smith Tosta (from an evangelical community) was murdered inside her church during a service.

### **Men:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Economic harassment via fines, False charges, Forced to flee town/country, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

<sup>179</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Poro>

<sup>180</sup> <http://derechosdelamujer.org/project/2020/>

<sup>181</sup> [https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/uploads/honduras\\_iccpr\\_loi\\_july\\_2016.pdf](https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/uploads/honduras_iccpr_loi_july_2016.pdf)

<sup>182</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2014/07/472762-honduras-must-address-widespread-impunity-crimes-against-women-girls-un-expert#.U8XKft3D88F>

<sup>183</sup> <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-TIP-Report-Complete-062420-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>184</sup> <https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/1050121-410/mareros-obligan-a-mujeres-a-tener-relaciones-sexuales-sino-las-matan>

High rates of criminal activity and the presence of notorious gangs such as [MS-13](#)<sup>185</sup> and Barrio 18 also pose daily security threats to Christian men and boys (BBC News, 14 February 2020). Church leaders are particularly vulnerable to attacks and threats, especially those involved in missional activities or those seeking to stop the trafficking of narcotics. Extortion through fines and threats are commonplace. Between October 2019 and February 2020 there were reported cases in the Triunfo de la Cruz area in which three pastors were abducted and held for 16 days in inhumane conditions. At the time of the kidnapping, the gang members were wearing police uniforms. While these church leaders were released, other pastors have lost their lives at the hands of these criminal groups. Within the past year there have been reports of pastors being shot in their cars and during church services (La Prensa, 9 October 2019; [Once Noticias](#)<sup>186</sup>, 14 January 2020).

In March 2020 a [21-year old man](#)<sup>187</sup> was killed during a worship service at an Evangelical church. His crime: refusing to enroll in a gang (El Herald, 7 March 2020). One of the greatest threats facing young Christian men and adolescents is forced gang recruitment. Whereas women and girls are commonly victims of sexual and gender-based violence, young men are exploited for criminal purposes, including drug trafficking. Some gang members are permitted to leave gangs upon conversion to Christianity (particularly Evangelical Christianity), however will come under close scrutiny and monitoring from both their old gang as well as rival gangs. Any signs that they are not actively living out their faith can result in their death. Ex-gang member converts additionally face assimilation challenges; police and military who identify him as a former gang member – typically by his tattoos or scars - can submit or stop him at any time for suspected crimes. The COVID-19 pandemic has added further challenges for endangered men and boys. The restrictions on movement imposed, as well as the closure of borders, have [hampered their routes](#)<sup>188</sup> to flee from danger (UN News, 17 December 2020).

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## 68) Angola

### **Women:**

**Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions.**

Although women are generally expected to be subservient to men in Angola, faith-specific gender-specific persecution is not widely reported. In some remote parts of the country, female Christian believers who have left Catholicism or African Traditional Religions (ATR) may be disinherited or lose custody of their children.

### **Men:**

**Forced to flee town/country, Violence – psychological.**

<sup>185</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-51501103>

<sup>186</sup> <https://www.oncenoticias.hn/lamentable-hijo-de-pastor-evangelico-es-asesinado-en-villanueva-cortes/>

<sup>187</sup> <https://www.elheraldo.hn/sucesos/1362239-466/a-balazos-matan-a-jovencito-en-una-iglesia-evang%C3%A9lica-de-choloma>

<sup>188</sup> <https://news.un.org/es/story/2020/12/1485752>

Gender-specific religious persecution against Christian men and boys in Angola has not been widely reported. Church leaders are most vulnerable when such persecution does occur; they may be mentally abused for faith-related reasons and targeted by security forces. Some have reportedly had to go into hiding to escape arrest by the police.

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## 69) South Sudan

### Women:

**Forced marriage, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence – sexual.**

In South Sudan, the prolonged civil war has been a major instigating factor for the [increase in sexual violence](#)<sup>189</sup> against women. According to a [report](#)<sup>190</sup> of the Secretary General to the Security Council (S/2020/487, 3 June 2020, p27 and 28), sexual violence in Sudan has reached ‘appalling levels of brutality’ and is ‘often committed with political and ethnic undertones.’ The report further noted that perpetrators often enjoyed impunity for their actions. Against this backdrop of complex ethnic and political tensions, it is difficult to discern the exact motivations behind the violence experienced by Christian women and girls. It is clear, however, that the use of rape as a weapon in armed conflict makes women and girls more susceptible to religious persecution which mimics the war-practices by those opposed to their Christian faith. Regional experts indicate that rape and gender-based violence is the most common form of persecution affecting Christian women and girls. The trauma experienced prevents many of these women from forming stable relationships. As an expert explains, they can no longer “appreciate the sacredness of sexual relations and its place in the family.”

Further, South Sudan is one of six countries in the world which has [not specified a minimum age for marriage](#)<sup>191</sup> hence leaving a loophole for early and forced marriages. It has the [eighth highest rate](#)<sup>192</sup> of child marriage in the world, with 52% of girls marrying by the age of 18 (Girls Not Brides). The prevalence of this practice, most often carried out because of extreme poverty and to secure much-needed assets for families, (including cattle, money, and other gifts via the payment of a bride price), creates an obvious avenue of repression and control of young female converts. Elders and ethnic leaders have reportedly forced young girls to marry people that they have not even met.

The killing of men and forceful conscription of boys as child soldiers (see below) has a catastrophic impact on Christian families and communities. Women are left without any way to fend for themselves while mourning the loss of their husbands and sons. The resulting anguish greatly weakens their capacity to do anything either economic or development related.

<sup>189</sup> <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/06/relief-chief-rampant-sexual-abuse-violence-south-sudan-180619110209366.html>

<sup>190</sup> <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/report/conflict-related-sexual-violence-report-of-the-united-nations-secretary-general/2019-SG-Report.pdf>

<sup>191</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/09/12/many-countries-allow-child-marriage/>

<sup>192</sup> <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/child-marriage/south-sudan/>

**Men:**

**Discrimination/harassment via education, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence – death.**

The 2013-2019 civil war led to the mass recruitment of males, particularly of boys who were halted in their education and targeted instead to become child soldiers. As of July 2020, [four million people](#)<sup>193</sup> remained displaced by the civil war (Human Rights Watch, 9 July 2020). The [Covid-19](#)<sup>194</sup> pandemic has placed further pressure on a fragile stage in the peace process (UN News, 23 June 2020). Whilst exact figures are lacking, [UNICEF](#)<sup>195</sup> estimated that 9000 children in South Sudan have been recruited into armed forces and groups by both sides of the conflict since 2013 (UNICEF, “South Sudan Child Soldiers”). Conscription into armed groups is therefore an available means of repression and control and has become the most common form of persecution affecting men and boys. Men also run the risk of being killed by government forces upon suspicion of being part of rebel forces. Reports indicate that religious leaders and Christian workers are particularly in danger. As a regional expert writes, “if any pastor speaks against the current corruption, nepotism, rape, or other issues, he will be killed.”

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## 70) Gambia

**Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Whilst the Gambian State Constitution ensures that women are of equal legal standing to men and grants equal rights, [in practice](#)<sup>196</sup> Gambia is a patriarchal society where men are the head of the household and women and girls are socialized into assuming a subordinate status (OECD, 2019, “Social Institutions and Gender Index, Gambia”). In a country where almost 90% of the population are Muslims, it is challenging for Christian families to live according to Christian values. FGM and child marriage has [reportedly risen](#)<sup>197</sup> in recent years, making women and girls additionally vulnerable (Reuters, 23 January 2018).

Female converts to Christianity face the greatest pressures for their faith, both those from a Muslim and Animist background. When converts share their new-found faith with their families, they may face physical and verbal abuse, disinheritance, abandonment and even death threats for betraying their parent’s religion. Forced marriage is also used as a weapon to apply pressure on converts, to encourage them to reject Christianity. Families may incentivize girls to enter these marriages freely by finding wealthy Muslim men who can provide for their material needs, or

<sup>193</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/09/9-years-south-sudan-still-nation-waiting>

<sup>194</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/06/1066952>

<sup>195</sup> [https://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_73457.html](https://www.unicef.org/media/media_73457.html)

<sup>196</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/GM.pdf>

<sup>197</sup> <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-gambia-women-fgm/with-newfound-democracy-gambia-faces-resurgence-in-fgm-and-child-marriage-idUSKBN1FC0XA>

alternatively threaten them with the prospect of kidnapping and forced marriage. If already married, converts will likely be divorced and have their children removed from them, in order to ensure the children do not grow up to be Christians. Any family or church community that receives rejected women and girls will automatically become an enemy of those who evicted and disowned them.

**Men:**

**Economic harassment via work/job/business, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Christian men and boys in Gambia experience physical, psychological and verbal abuse for their faith. This mostly affects converts who are punished for betraying the religion of their Muslim or Animist families. Pastors and church leaders in particular are subject to harassment, mockery, death threats and kidnapping for their faith. Christian men may also face discrimination in the workplace, or be denied promotions. These forms of persecution serve to harm his wider family, as the man is usually the financial provider.

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## 71) Togo

**Women:**

**Abduction, Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Discrimination/harassment via education, Enforced religious dress code, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Forced out of home – expulsion, Incarceration by family/house arrest, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

As is the case for men, women and girls in Togo may find themselves involved against their will in traditional rites and practices, such as Voodoo or 'generation parties', depending on the communities in which they live.

Converts from Muslim and Traditional African Religion backgrounds face additional challenges for their faith. Forced marriage is a common method of preventing female converts from leaving their parent's religion. Some Muslim families have deliberately forced their daughters to marry a strict Muslim husband to prevent them from living as practicing Christians. They are prevented from marrying another Christian of their choice, as the family will oppose the marriage based on religion. Animist parents have been known to act similarly.

Female converts also characteristically face physical beatings, abandonment, sexual abuse including rape, verbal abuse, disinheritance, eviction and threats. House arrest is described by an expert as "the most common weapon used by our Togolese parents and communities to weaken the faith of new converts and to discriminate against them in front of others in order to discourage others from following the same path." If already married, significant pressure is also applied on their spouse to divorce them and refuse the convert custody of their children. Reversely, unmarried converts are often forced to accept marriages arranged by their parents to non-Christians. If she refuses, this may lead to her being abducted and forcibly taken to the home of the intended man. Despite Togolese law stipulating that both parties must

consent to marriage, forced marriages such as these [continue to take place](#)<sup>198</sup> in several communities (OECD, 2019, “Social Institutions and Gender Index: Togo”).

Church leaders and pastors encourage new converts to keep their distance from their families in the light of these harsh responses. Christian women who leave Catholicism can also face many of the aforementioned pressures.

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied food or water, Denied inheritance or possessions, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Christian men and boys can be affected by cultural traditions such as Voodoo, which sometimes results in traditional practices inflicting suffering on children. This is particularly prevalent in rural areas. The harshest persecution is experienced by converts. Male Christians from a Muslim or Animist background face physical abuse, verbal harassment, rejection, disinheritance, reduced food, threats and stigma because of their faith. Reports further indicate that Christians may be denied property lettings for a business, or let go in favor of a Muslim employee. Male converts come under harsh scrutiny in their local communities and face intimidation on a daily basis. The combination of these pressures drives a small number of Christians from their homes and towns altogether in search of safety.

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## 72) Rwanda

**Women:**

**Denied custody of children, Denied inheritance or possessions, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Despite Rwanda boasting the [largest female Parliamentary representation](#)<sup>199</sup> in the world (National Geographic, 15 Oct 2019), patriarchal attitudes continue to dominate culture. As noted in a [2017 CEDAW periodic review](#)<sup>200</sup>, “there is a general lack of acceptance of women in decision-making positions and reluctance to implement decisions made by them.” These cultural norms can be exploited for the purpose of religious persecution against women.

In a country where forced marriage, abduction and female genital mutilation are [common in most regions](#)<sup>201</sup>, some forced marriages are fueled by religious motivations (OECD, 2019, “Social Institutions and Gender Index: Rwanda”). Parents of female converts marry them to Muslims to try and restore them to the Islamic faith. Converts are also vulnerable to physical, sexual and verbal attacks. Sexual abuse was widely cited by regional experts as the primary challenge facing female converts.

<sup>198</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/TG.pdf>

<sup>199</sup> <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/2019/10/graphic-shows-women-representation-in-government-around-the-world-feature/>

<sup>200</sup> <https://www.refworld.org/publisher,CEDAW,,RWA,596f4b0a4,0.html>

<sup>201</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/RW.pdf>

If they are already married when they become a Christian, women from a Muslim or Animist background will most likely be divorced and subsequently refused custody of their children. Additionally, converts are often denied their inheritance rights, which can be hard for them to endure.

**Men:**

**Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Violence – physical.**

Gender-specific persecution against Rwandan men and boys on faith-related grounds is not widely reported. When it does occur, it usually takes the form of physical violence or imprisonment. Pastors in particular are vulnerable to being detained. The pressures on church leaders in Rwanda and difficulties in registering churches has led to many migrating to Uganda and Tanzania.

Converts from a Muslim background are also exposed to persecution. A minimum of five converts are believed to have been excommunicated from their homes, having come under extreme pressure from their families. Others may encounter discrimination in the workplace, or even lose their job. If men are persecuted, their role as family provider may be compromised and his dependents will also suffer. Likewise, if converts are forced out of their family home because of their faith, they will be vulnerable economically.

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## 73) Ivory Coast

**Women:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Denied custody of children, Discrimination/harassment via education, Forced divorce, Forced marriage, Targeted seduction, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

In general, the practices of forced or early marriage, polygamy and female genital mutilation (FGM) are [high](#)<sup>202</sup> in Ivory Coast (CEDAW, 30 July 2019, “Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Côte d’Ivoire”). In strongly Animist areas, women and girls are affected by the existence of female secret societies (such as the Sande society) and sometimes forced to become members. If Christian women and girls who live in communities where these societies are actively practiced refuse to be members due to their faith, they are often isolated from female-related activities.

Converts from Muslim and Animist backgrounds face the greatest breadth of pressures. Persecution takes forms of deprivation, as well as enticement. Converts may be divorced and denied custody of their children. The pressure on her spouse to divorce her often comes from Muslim relatives or friends who see her Christian faith as a source of dishonor. If a Christian convert remains a Christian while married to a Muslim, she will not be permitted to raise her children as Christians. She may also face physical and psychological abuse. The [lack of](#)

<sup>202</sup> [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/\\_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/CIV/CO/4&Lang=En](https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW/C/CIV/CO/4&Lang=En)

[legislation addressing domestic violence](#)<sup>203</sup> leaves women easily exposed in this regard (OECD, 2019, “Social Institutions and Gender Index, Côte d'Ivoire”).

Reversely, unmarried converts may be forced into marriage to older, rich Muslim men. Sources indicate that the parents of convert girls sometimes threaten them with the prospect of abduction and forced marriage in order to pressure them to return to Islam. Some women and girls (including non-converts) are targeted for marriage by more subtle means. Young Muslim men are reportedly encouraged to marry Christian girls. They attend churches, seduce and impregnate the Christian girls “by promising world and wonders,” a country expert explains.

**Men:**

**Denied access to social community/networks, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Forced out of home – expulsion, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

As is often the case in the region of West Africa, male Christians can be particularly subjected to hostility stemming from secret societies (such as the Poro), especially if they live in communities where these societies are active and men are forced to become members. If they refuse, they will be excluded from male-related activities and isolated.

Converts from Muslim and Animist backgrounds face the most intense forms of persecution. They may be verbally, physically or emotionally mistreated by their families, who may reject them entirely, evict them and threaten them with violence. They are also discriminated against in terms of their education; Muslim youth receive more opportunities to study abroad and parents will often stop financial support, halting the progress of their education. Upon discovery of their conversion, men may also be discriminated against in the workplace, possibly even losing their jobs. Shops have reportedly been targeted and boycotted because they belonged to Christians. As men are usually the financial providers of the family, these economic pressures harm their wider families and dependents.

In rare instances, converts may be killed for their faith. In the past reporting year, a young man was killed by his brother, who sprayed him with gasoline and set him alight in his sleep.

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## 74) El Salvador

**Women:**

**Abduction, Discrimination/harassment via education, Forced to flee town/country, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Trafficking, Violence - psychological, Violence - sexual, Violence - verbal.**

Daily life in El Salvador is heavily affected by the presence of gangs such as MS-13 and Barrio 18, who according to reports [have taken advantage](#)<sup>204</sup> of the COVID-19 pandemic, exploiting the fact that security forces diverted attention away from them to curb the violence (BBC News, 27 April 2020, “El Salvador: Gangs ‘taking advantage of pandemic’”). Between January and August

<sup>203</sup> <https://www.genderindex.org/wp-content/uploads/files/datasheets/2019/CI.pdf>

<sup>204</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-52439856>

2020, [84 femicides](#)<sup>205</sup> were committed. Whilst overall this reflects a decrease compared to 2019, the figures nonetheless indicate a rise during lockdown months. Of the 84 femicides, 56 were committed between April to August when there was greater coexistence of women with their aggressors (Directorate of Information and Analysis).

Within this context of widespread violence and crime, Christian women experience several challenges on the basis of their faith. Some young Christian women are forced to have sex with gang members or become their brides. Refusal is not an option and may result in her being killed, or her family members threatened. Daughters of pastors who actively work in gang territory are particularly targeted, both for their perceived purity and assumed obedience, and secondly as a way of intimidating the victim's parents and halt pastoral activities in their gang territory. During the COVID-19 lockdown, some pastor's daughters were reportedly raped in retaliation against the pastors who continued to carry out acts of worship during the quarantine, leaving them physically assaulted and psychologically traumatized.

In a concerning development, it has become known that 'Black Widow' gangs force women to marry men and then kill their husbands for the insurance money. They traffic young women from the countryside to the city with the promise of 'paid work.' According to a local expert, Christian women may be targeted for this purpose as "can generally be used as better facades to convince a man to marry."

In fear of the gangs, many parents choose to keep their daughters at home rather than sending them to school. Many [choose to flee](#)<sup>206</sup> the country in order not to be part of the criminal activities of the gangs (UNHCR, 16 Jul 2019). Whilst fleeing, families continue to face ongoing dangers as criminal groups infiltrate and monitor major migration routes.

**Men:**

**Abduction, Discrimination/harassment via education, Economic harassment via work/job/business, Economic harassment via fines, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Violence - death, Violence - physical, Violence - psychological, Violence - verbal.**

Adolescent boys are particularly vulnerable to forced recruitment into gangs. Within these groups, they are forced to participate in initiation crime practices, run drugs and extort victims. Should he refuse he puts his life - as well as the lives of his family members - at risk. In addition to being forced into gangs, Christians are commonly victims of gang violence. They are special targets of harassment, especially if they conduct activities that endanger the power and influence of gangs in certain areas. Christian face threats, extortion, beating, attacks on their business, forced displacement, and killings.

Pastors and church leaders, usually men, are particularly vulnerable. As many church leaders have used their position to actively speak out against the activity of gangs, or to minister to gang members, they have faced threats and reprisals. In the past reporting year several leaders have been fined, harassed, threatened and assassinated. In February two pastors who had carried out evangelism activities in gang-controlled territory despite warnings failed to return home. They are

<sup>205</sup> <https://observatoriodeviolencia.ormusa.org/>

<sup>206</sup> <https://www.acnur.org/noticias/historia/2019/7/5d2397784/la-violencia-no-puede-dictar-nuestro-futuro.html>

presumed to have been kidnapped or killed. Church leaders have also been arbitrarily detained and questioned by State agents due to their ministry work with active and former gang members.

Gang members who convert to evangelical Christianity are, in general, have historically been allowed to leave the gang on the grounds of their new religion. This is one of few possible pathways for members to leave gangs. According to one such member, there are [three options](#)<sup>207</sup> available to young men in El Salvador: “You join the gang, You join the evangelical church. Or you leave El Salvador” (NPR, 2 July 2018). Gangs have however, become more reticent to allow converts to leave the gang during the past year; having lost more members through the COVID-19 pandemic and conflict with police, they have been slow to let remaining members go. According to a missionary, the gangs even began “forcing former gang members to return to the criminal structure despite their religious practice. This was a drastic change from how gang leaders previously treated religious converts.” New converts who are allowed to leave will be constantly monitored, both by their old gang as well as rival gangs, to make sure that they do not join a new gang. Whereas in other countries a convert could be killed for becoming a Christian, any sign that a former gang member is not living out his Christian life authentically can result in his death in Nicaragua. In addition to being monitored by gangs, converts also experience challenges trying to reintegrate into society as Christians, particularly as many are visibly marked by scars and tattoos that indicate their former allegiance, making them more vulnerable to suspicion and arrest. These hardships have caused some men, struggling in their faith, to return to their gang for protection.

In light of these pressures and constant threats, many Christian men [choose to flee](#)<sup>208</sup> El Salvador. In one recent instance, a pastor who was receiving constant threats due to the missionary work he had carried out in MS-18 controlled territory, was ordered to leave or ‘face the consequences.’ He consequently fled to Mexico together with his family (UNHCR, 16 July 2019).

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<sup>207</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2018/07/02/625259818/in-el-salvador-becoming-an-evangelical-is-a-way-out-of-a-gang?t=1610614725915>

<sup>208</sup> <https://www.acnur.org/noticias/historia/2019/7/5d2397784/la-violencia-no-puede-dictar-nuestro-futuro.html>