



Gendered Persecution: World Watch List 2018 Analysis and Implications

Researchers in 33 countries explore persecution as a gender-specific phenomenon for the first time, drawing on analysis from the World Watch List 2018

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1. Executive Summary

Drawing on analysis written to accompany the 2018 World Watch List of countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian, researchers explored persecution as a gender-specific phenomenon for the first time and reported on distinguishing characteristics for each gender in their country.

A fundamental finding is that Christian men and women experience persecution in very different ways. No overlap exists between the three most prevalent gendered experiences of pressure on Christians to abandon their faith. Christian men are most often subject to pressures related to work, military/militia conscription and non-sexual physical violence. Whereas Christian women are specifically and most frequently targeted through forced marriage, rape, and other forms of sexual violence.

Far from being gender-blind, persecution exploits all the available vulnerabilities that women have. The pressures faced by Christian women are twice as numerous as those experienced by Christian men.

Whatever form it takes, the ultimate goal of all gender-specific persecution is to destroy the Christian community. For both genders, reported dynamics describe the knock-on effect of individual attacks. Mixed equally into the specific tactics used against men and women is also the regular use of social pressure through shunning or shaming, which can have both economic and physical-security implications.

2. Introduction

In practice, Christian women and men both face various pressures for their faith in different social, legal, physical or economic ways. We refer to these as “pressure points”, and have identified 37 such phenomena. The way these pressures are applied has largely to do with the vulnerabilities of each gender in their social context or the point which produces the greatest damage to their family or community. For women, this is often associated with perceived sexual purity or family status, for men it is associated with their roles as breadwinner and/or church leader. In both cases, the ultimate effects are economic, social and emotional for the whole family and church community.

3. Persecution experienced by men: focused, severe and visible

The report reveals the focused and severe nature of persecution that is characteristic of the persecution faced by Christian men globally. Repeatedly characterised by researchers as ‘breadwinners’ and ‘church leaders’, Christian men across the 30 respondent countries are most often subject to pressures related to work, conscription into the army or into militias, and non-sexual physical violence. What is notable for them, relative to women, is the concentration of intense pressure through relatively few means.

a) Economic

Reflecting men's commonly held role as breadwinners, discrimination around the area of work is the form of persecution most often experienced by Christian men. This was mentioned in reports for 18 of the 30 countries surveyed for the World Watch List. This discrimination essentially takes two forms: either preventing men from obtaining or retaining gainful employment, or discrimination that leads to exploitation and abuse. For the most part, this would demonstrate the 'squeeze' aspect of persecution at work, as opposed to the more sudden and catastrophic 'smash' approach.

The research from Iraq provides a clear example: "Job discrimination affects men belonging to all Christian denominations, especially Christians working in the public sector. Christians in central and southern Iraq have been put under pressure to leave their jobs, especially if they are working for foreign organisations or are employed at higher levels of society (e.g. government companies). In the north, Christians report that they struggle to get employment and feel vulnerable and prone to exploitation at work."

This latter aspect, of exploitation in the workplace, is a recurrent theme across the Middle East and the Gulf. From Qatar it was noted, "Most of the time, Christian men are the breadwinner for their families and face the brunt of discrimination (at their workplaces) to help their families. It noted that men can also easily become the victim of discrimination in the labour camps, the low-cost accommodation for expatriate labourers, many of whom come from south Asia."

The most extreme of instances of work-related discrimination against Christians came from Libya, where the country's tiny Christian population – estimated at 41,700 – comprises mainly African migrants. The research reported: "Forced labour and forms of slavery are widespread forms of abuse and persecution experienced by Christian men."

b) Physical security

Although there are more total citations of violence against women, the words used to describe the instances of violence against men include unique, severe terms. In Somalia, Christian men were subjected to "death, [being] tortured, [being] burnt alive and others [being] shot to death", while In Libya the research reported "beatings, torture and degrading treatment [as] ways through which Christian men suffer from persecution."

In the descriptions for each country, death appears an equal number of times for men and for women. However, for countries where violence against men is flagged as characteristic, it is because violence is notably more common towards men than towards women. For example, in the case of Yemen, where the Christian presence comprises a few thousand converts from Islam, "men face a greater risk of 'martyrdom'".

Globally, the pressure does not come from one religious group. The researcher from India, who found that among other difficulties "the forms of persecution Christian men and boys are particularly subject to are brutal beatings amounting to attempted murder", was describing a context in which churches are more often targeted by Hindu nationalists.

c) Conscription

The third most frequently occurring area of pressure on Christian men relates to either mandatory military service or informal conscription into local militia.

Christian men in countries flagged up on the World Watch List find that the imposition of mandatory military service creates an environment in which they are particularly at risk. This can be for a variety of reasons, as exemplified by the following extracts. In Syria, where there is enforced military service for all men reaching the age of 18, “some Christians are conscientious objectors, and this can prompt consideration of emigration”. In Turkey, “during military service men are in an environment where, if their religion is stated as being Christianity in their ID, they can be viewed with suspicion by their superiors and bullied by their peers”.

Conscription by local militia groups can have even more devastating effects on Christian men and their wider communities. This was especially noted in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. For example, in Nigeria, “Christian men and boys have often been targeted specifically, especially in the north-eastern part of the country, where Boko Haram has been active. Many have been attacked, abducted and forced to join the militant group. Such attacks have a devastating effect on the Church and Christian families.”

While in Mexico and Colombia, researchers found that, “In the areas controlled by criminal groups or drug cartels, young men are exposed to indoctrination and mandatory participation in these groups. In some cases, due to the economic and social context, young men accept this as their inescapable destiny and those who do not accept this – whether for Christian or other reasons – are persecuted, threatened and often abducted.”

d) Government

A notable area of contrast between how men and women experience persecution is how likely they are to be imprisoned for their faith. Only two of the 30 countries surveyed associated government arrest with Christian women, whereas researchers in seven countries listed it as a threat facing Christian men. For Christian men, it is by the government, via a state-permitted process of arrest, interrogation, legal charges and sentencing or indefinite imprisonment without charge.

The findings on Iran showed that “in the reporting period covered by the 2018 World Watch List, more men were arrested, prosecuted and sentenced by the government than women”. Other examples came from Sudan, where the state “often accuses Christian males of spying for the West” or Nepal, where “often the local police administration takes the Christian men away for intensive and lengthy interrogation”.

Only two countries mentioned that men might be subject to an effective house arrest, and these were both in Central Asia.

4. How women experience persecution: complex, violent and hidden

The ways in which women experience persecution appear to be very different from the way it affects men. Researchers found 16 “pressure points” affecting women that got no mention in the reports regarding men. Conversely, four “pressure points” experienced by men did not feature in the findings relating to women. All 17 other pressure points applied to both genders at least once. This gives a total of 33 pressure points in the lives of Christian women under pressure for their faith. Among these are several involving violence and, as the picture of persecution tactics used against each gender unfolds, it becomes clear that women face *more* physical violence than men, both in terms of the quantity and the variety of forms that violence takes.

a) Forced Marriage

The most regularly reported means of putting pressure on Christian women is one which remains largely invisible: forced marriage. Of the 33 countries featured in the 2018 World Watch List that provided reports on gender-specific persecution of women, 17 cited this form of persecution. None reported its use against men.

Sometimes the practice was reported on fairly directly, as in case of Yemen. “Female converts are also likely to be married off to a Muslim if their conversion is known.” Other times, the fact that this can be done without recourse to a justice system requires explanation. This is because multiple forms of persecution perpetrated against women are often shrouded beneath cultural differences. For instance, where Christian women live within a different value system (e.g. Sharia law), practices which are far from gender-neutral – such as polygamy, child marriage and female genital mutilation – can rob the Church of its female element. A Nigerian researcher explained, “Many [Christian women and girls] are also forced into marriage with non-Christians. The fact that there are laws which permit underage marriage in some states (as well the existence of cultural and religious norms that discourage girls from going to school) contributes to this problem.”

b) Rape, other sexual assault and non-sexual violence

All told, the 2018 Gender Profiles highlight five categories of violence: rape, other sexual assault, domestic violence, non-sexual physical violence, and verbal violence. In countries which report violence against men and women, various forms of violence against women are mentioned 41 times, compared to 18 perpetrated against Christian men.

In addition, the ultimate form of violence – killing – was listed by many countries as affecting Christian women as well as men.

Among all forms of violence, however, the one most often noted was rape. The research found it to be a common characteristic of persecution of Christian women in 17 countries, with other forms of sexual assault being listed for exactly half of countries with available data. There are no mentions of this form of violence against men, nor is domestic violence one of the pressures mentioned as a tactic used against Christian men.

Vulnerability to sexual assault is perhaps taken to its greatest extreme in one of the Latin America Gender Profiles. “Since Mexico is one of the countries with the highest rate of human-trafficking, women are an easy target for recruitment, especially in the areas controlled by mafia and drug cartels, in which girls and women (who) have been abducted are used for sex slavery and prostitution.”

c) House arrest

Although government imprisonment of men is more common, reports from nine countries listed house arrest as a way Christian women experience persecution. The house arrest reported in the research is not government-imposed, but family enforced and, as such, is another mainly invisible constraint on the female portion of a Christian community. Combined with the two countries which also reported government imprisonment for Christian women, there are more countries reporting loss of freedom of movement for women than for men.

House arrest was found to be a pressure faced by Christian women in all Central Asian countries, as well as Somalia, Jordan, Yemen, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

d) Abduction

The abduction of women is most often associated with forced marriage and rape, according to the Gender Profiles. Seven of the 30 countries which responded for both men and women mentioned abduction as a well-known way in which Christian women are targeted because of their faith. Four of the countries mentioned abduction for men, and it was associated mainly with militia conscription.

The strongest example of the extent and devastating effect of abduction is clearly found in the Pakistan Profile, which states: “Horrific statistics continue to indicate that an estimated 700 Pakistani Christian girls and women are abducted each year, often raped and then forcefully married to Muslim men from the community. This involves forced conversions as well, and 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.” As for many of the other pressure points for women, social pressure and lack of legal protection collude to make the defence of girls or women caught in these dynamics nearly impossible.

Sometimes the lines between abduction and seduction with intent are blurred. “Women are often subjected to harassment, forced marriage or marriage by abduction and sexual assault. Although such abuses are common practices that affect women in Egypt, there have been reports that Christian women are particularly targeted for marriage by abduction. Many of the Christian girls who are lured in to marriage are underage and come from poor and vulnerable families. Such persecution causes great psychological trauma and pain to Christian families and communities.”

e) Multiplicity

Far from being gender-blind, persecution exploits all the available vulnerabilities that women have, including: lack of access to education, healthcare or infrastructure; forced divorce; travel bans; trafficking; widowhood; incarceration in a psychiatric unit; forced abortions or contraception; being denied access to work or the choice of a Christian spouse.

The profile from Central African Republic (CAR) flows from one such vulnerability to another, underlining the cause-and-effect relationship between vulnerabilities. “Women and girls are frequently subjected to rape and sexual assault in CAR, particularly when militants attack civilian communities. They are also often forced into marriage under threat of violence. Polygamy also seems to be an accepted practice [in certain communities]. Hence, women and girls are particularly vulnerable to sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies, and young girls who are abused and get pregnant are likely to drop out of school.”

Another prime example of this dynamic comes from Uzbekistan, where “total submission is expected from women to their parents and if married, to their husbands”. Researchers explained further that pressure comes not only from family but also from the state and for Orthodox believers, their Church. “This makes them more vulnerable to persecution - both as Christians and as women who challenge the existing order. Christian women and girls are suffering from verbal and physical abuse, threats, beatings, detention, interrogation, fines, imprisonment, job loss, discrimination, excommunication, home detention, forced marriage, family violence and rape, shaming, divorce, and loss of possessions.”

With such a multiplicity of potential pressure points, the persecution dynamic becomes complex: an event in one area of vulnerability can produce a knock-on effect on other areas of vulnerability.

Likewise, legal inequality compounds women’s vulnerabilities. According to a researcher reporting on Jordan, “When married to non-Christian husbands, female converts [to Christianity] risk abuse and death threats - which cause some to flee. They are also faced with travel restrictions. Travel bans can be imposed by the authorities but also by family, 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.’”

The ‘package’ nature of persecution which Christian women can face is succinctly described in the profile for Saudi Arabia: “If their conversion gets known, they risk violence, house arrest [by their family] and forced marriage.” It is a compound threat.

5. Men and women – common effects of gender-specific persecution

The leveraging of pressure points against specific genders results in a different experience of persecution for men or women, but the same rippling impact upon the church community: each of these blows diminishes community resilience.

a) Trauma

One common element is the insidious and invisible impact of trauma, as is clearly exemplified from Libya: “The form of persecution that occurs particularly to Christian women and girls is sexual assault and rape. In addition to the physical pain and injury that such attack causes on the victims, the trauma and emotional hardship it causes to their family, friends and fellow Christians is very high.” Similarly, the research from Mali stated: “Young men are subjected to abduction, forced conversion and conscription in militia in the northern parts of the country.

This has a devastating effect on their families and fellow Christians who are traumatised by such persecution.”

b) Shaming and shunning

Mixed into so many of the family and communal dynamics described in the Gender Profiles is the isolation created by shaming or shunning of someone who has experienced persecution, which can alienate them from their community and tear apart families. This tactic, when activated inside and outside the Church, is a powerful coercive force against both genders in a persecution dynamic. However, the research on Iran found that because the issue of honour and shame is an important element within Iranian society, “a woman’s conversion and arrest are often more shameful to families than when male members leave Islam.”

c) Economic disempowerment

In the mostly traditional and tribal parts of Iraqi society, men are often the primary breadwinners for their families, and losing their jobs can have a considerable impact on Christian families. As the research on Iraq found: “Men from a non-Muslim Christian background risk being killed for their faith, the perpetrators being mostly radical Islamic militants. 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. A convert’s family could face also mockery and pressure from the husband’s Muslim family. The loss of Christian men not only affects their direct families, but also the local church which consequently finds itself confronted with a lack of potential leadership. As such, Christian men - particular former Muslims - are in a very vulnerable position to sustain their families.”

Turkmenistan researchers concurred: “When a Christian man becomes a target of persecution, and fined or imprisoned, his whole family will suffer. Losing jobs will affect the whole family.”

The same dynamic can also apply if a woman’s ability to earn is jeopardised affecting the economic health of the wider community. As the Nigerian researcher explains, “The persecution of women and girls has a detrimental effect on the Church and Christian families. In addition to the great emotional toll and social cost, in communities where widows are the main breadwinners, such persecution also affects the economic wellbeing of the community.”

d) Divorce, loss of custody

Another way that Christian women are discriminated against for their faith can be in the area of divorce and losing legal guardianship of her children. However, this can also affect Christian men in some countries. For example research from Yemen found that “a man whose wife is not a believer may be less likely to share his faith with others, because he fears his children will be raised as Muslims should his witness lead to his death or should he lose custody of his children in the case of divorce.” In a similar vein, the research on Saudi Arabia states: “If married, a female convert risks divorce and losing custody of her children. This means loss of a social safety net and protection.”

6. Implications

Far from being gender-blind, persecution exploits all available vulnerabilities, resulting in distinct differences in the experience of persecution for Christian men and women and implying a multiplicity of possible persecuting agents.

a) Identifying areas of vulnerability

In July 2017, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom issued a report, *Women and Religious Freedom: Synergies and Opportunities*, which found that, “While a common misperception persists that women’s rights to equality and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) are clashing rights, the two are actually indivisible and interrelated.” This intersectionality of human rights suppressions creates an environment in which it becomes expedient for aggressors to target men and women of a disfavored religious community differently, according to their gender. As we have already noted, the social and legal status of women in certain countries will create a likelihood of compound risks for some Christian women.

This intersectionality sets the stage for the sort of description found in the Gender Profile for Nepal, which identifies a progression that can occur in which “Christian women and girls are also subjected to physical violence but it comes gradually after emotional and mental torture. In an initial phase, they are emotionally tortured by the immediate family members (e.g. husband, in-laws, parents). Gradually the mental and physical torture starts until finally they are regarded as social outcasts by the family and community. This makes them vulnerable and victims of sexual oppression.”

Meanwhile, the position of Christian men in their societies can make it most expedient for pressures on them to focus on their ability to financially support their families or continue in positions of church leadership.

b) Family is church

For Christian women and men, a targeted attack of an individual often results in harm to their entire family. In the entirety of the Gender Profiles, “family” is mentioned 65 times in descriptions of the dynamics of gendered persecution. This is nearly three times as many mentions as for “church”. As we have noted in Mali, the abduction, forced conversion and conscription into militias to which some young men are subjected “has a devastating effect on their families and fellow Christians, who are traumatised by such persecution.”

Church communities, being composed of families, are necessarily weakened when a single family’s emotional, psychological or economic stability is compromised. These difficulties can affect each individual’s spiritual well-being as well as that of their church. This dynamic is described in the findings for Iraq regarding Christians and those who have converted to Christianity:

“Families ... apart from being left without income, often face emotional trauma if the man flees or is killed. A convert’s family could face also mockery and pressure from the husband’s Muslim family. The loss of Christian men not only affects their direct families, but also the local church

which consequently finds itself confronted with a lack of potential leadership. As such, Christian men - particular former Muslims - are in a very vulnerable position to sustain their families.”

7. Conclusion

The 2018 Gender Profiles of Persecution put to rest the myth that persecuting agents are gender-blind. Having said that, the uniting factor from the data is equally important: the targets are never ultimately the individual, but their families and communities.

8. Appendix – Methodology

The data was gathered for the 50 countries appearing in the World Watch List 2018. Of these, data for Gender Profiles was provided for 33 countries for women and 30 countries for men.

Qualitative data was provided by researchers and, in this very first gathering of data for Gender Profiles, captured spontaneously cited characteristics, tactics and dynamics. These were broken down into categories in order to arrive at a framework allowing for quantitative analysis. Eliciting non-formatted descriptions allowed us to track patterns that had not been pre-established through the particular framing of questions.

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

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