



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

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Contents

Preface to in-depth series – Rationale and structure	2
Why a special in-depth country series on Women and Persecution dynamics?	2
Spheres of pressure	3
Categories of pressure.....	3
1. Introduction: The situation in Egypt	5
1.1 Broader context for Christians in Egypt	5
1.2 The situation of women in Egypt.....	6
2. Domestic sphere	8
2.1 Domestic Violence.....	8
2.2 Conversion within the family.....	9
3. Societal and cultural sphere	10
3.1 Female Genital Mutilation.....	11
3.2 Abduction, rape and forced marriage	12
3.3 Sexual abuse and harassment	14
3.4 Dress codes.....	15
3.5 Female-headed households	16
3.6 Access to employment	17
4. State sphere	18
4.1 State education.....	20
4.2 Impunity	20
5. Conclusion	22

Preface to in-depth series – Rationale and structure

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Spheres of pressure³

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

Categories of pressure

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Please note:

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

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

1. Introduction: The situation in Egypt

The exposure of Christian women in Egypt to discrimination, threats of violence and aggression is compounded at multiple levels upon which they are marginalized both on the grounds of gender and religion. An examination of how Christian women's various social identities overlap to produce oppression (or opportunity for oppression) helps to build a more nuanced and complete picture of the forms, intensity and consequences of persecution against Christians.⁵ Broader political, socio-economic and cultural factors ranging from domestic violence to recent increased Islamist radicalism and political upheaval also provide a context for how Christian women are treated.

Through this lens, it is clear that the intersection between gender and religion in Egypt is exploited to deliberately intimidate and weaken the Church.

1.1 Broader context for Christians in Egypt⁶

WWL Year ⁷	WWL Points	WWL Position
2018	70	17
2017	65	21
2016	64	22
2015	61	23
2014	61	22

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

Egypt has seen huge political upheaval in recent years, with three regime changes in the period 2011-2014. All three governments have been highly authoritarian, and pluralism and human rights are currently a low priority in the face of severe economic and security challenges. 40% of the population live on less than US\$2 per day, and high levels of illiteracy persist, particularly in rural areas.

The primary Persecution engines in Egypt are Islamic oppression, Denominational protectionism and Dictatorial paranoia.⁸ Christians in Egypt have seen a rise in overall pressure in all areas in

⁵ In the absence of readily-available statistical information, interviews with local informants along with Open Doors research and field knowledge provide the data behind the dynamics explained.

⁶ "Country Dossiers: Egypt." Open Doors Analytical, *Open Doors*, May 2018. All World Watch Research country dossiers are available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/country-dossiers/> (password: freedom).

⁷ The reporting period for each "WWL year" is the November to October period directly prior to the year of publication. E.g. for WWL 2017, the research analysis covered 1 November 2015 – 31 October 2016 and was published in January 2017.

⁸ For an explanation of the individual Persecution engines, please see the WWL Methodology, pp. 12-15, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/WWL-2018-Methodology-LONG-VERSION-November-2017.pdf> (password: freedom).

the past year, as reflected in Figure 1: The points awarded to Egypt for pressure and violence against Christians have risen steadily since 2014, and its global ranking in the annual World Watch List has also risen.

Egypt is 90% Muslim, and Christians and other groups are under pressure, including non-Sunni Muslims. Historical Christian communities were better tolerated until the late 1970s, but this changed when Egyptian workers moved back home from Saudi Arabia, bringing Wahhabi ideology with them. In recent years the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood has increased the number of violent attacks against Christians. The perception of Christians as ‘second-class citizens’ filters into all their dealings with state, including political involvement, legislation, access to healthcare and to education, and the state has been reluctant to enforce the Constitutional rights of Christians. All Christians (both men and women) face a legal system which limits their individual and collective ability to exercise their faith through both laws themselves and through biased or absent implementation of laws.^{9, 10}

Christians are also under pressure within the family and in society generally. This can be seen particularly in the increasing number of extremely violent attacks on Christians. Much of this comes from ordinary people and local mobs, fuelled by radical preachers, but it also comes from Islamist groups. This violence leads to an inevitable context of fear for Christians. Local authorities have often failed or been very slow to protect Christians or to adequately prosecute perpetrators.

Despite efforts under President Al-Sisi to fight it, there is a growing problem of Sunni radicalism. In April 2017 the Government declared a state of emergency to try to tackle the ‘dangers and funding of terrorism’, following violent attacks against Christians. To date this state of emergency has continued to be extended.

1.2 The situation of women in Egypt

Women face discrimination, pressure and, often, violence in all areas of their lives. This is exacerbated for those who are poor or who lack education. This report is divided into domestic, societal and cultural and state structures, with Figure 1 highlighting some of the issues facing women, and Christian women in particular, in each of these spheres, but in reality these areas intersect and impact upon and enable one another.

⁹ “[Egypt: New Church Law Discriminates Against Christians.](https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/15/egypt-new-church-law-discriminates-against-christians)” *Human Rights Watch*, 15 Sep. 2016, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/15/egypt-new-church-law-discriminates-against-christians>.

¹⁰ Whewell, Tim. “[Christian Minority Under Pressure In Egypt.](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-middle-east-12014779/christian-minority-under-pressure-in-egypt)” *BBC News*, 17 Dec. 2010, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-middle-east-12014779/christian-minority-under-pressure-in-egypt>.

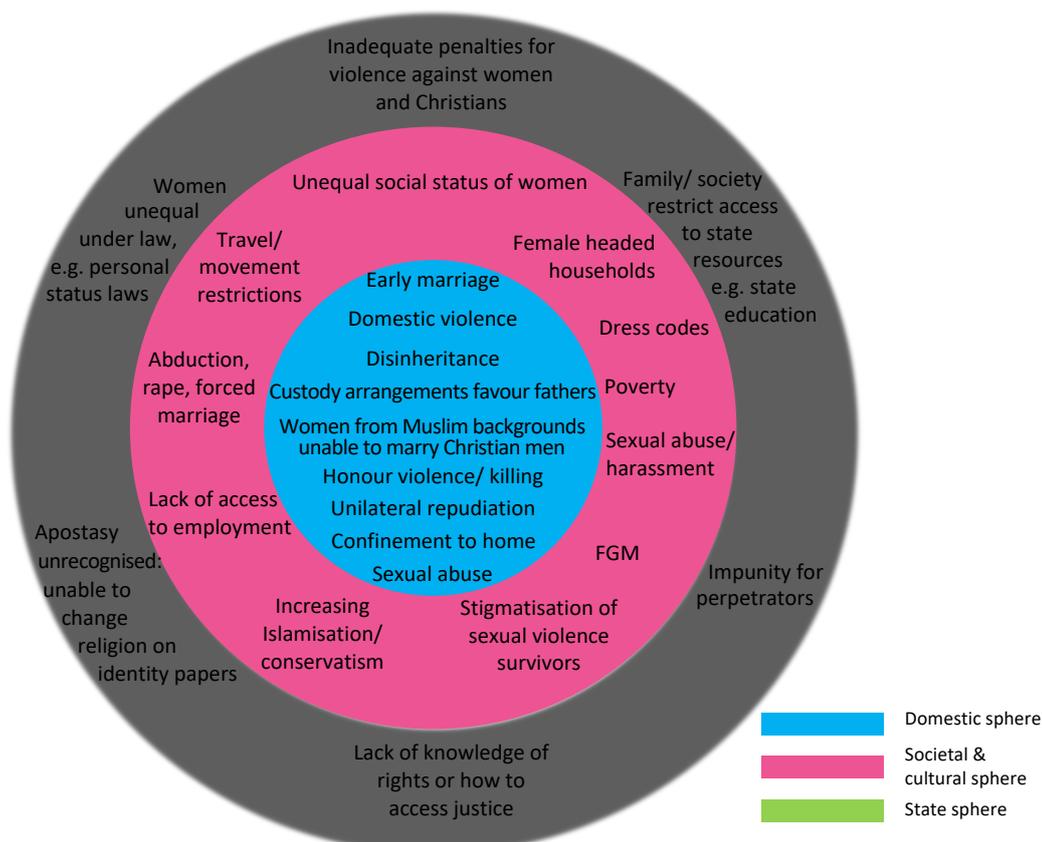


Figure 2: Areas of pressure faced by Egyptian women in general, and Christian women in particular.

The complexity of women’s situation is summed up by the following statements from Egyptian organizations:

Women are targeted in the majority of cases because of the ease with which their religious, tribal or political affiliation can be judged from their external appearance, clothing or behavior. Violence against women is thus often collective violence against the community to which the women belong.¹¹

Women’s right to lead a life free of violence is not widely internalized within Egyptian society, resulting in lack of reporting by victims of violence, lack of perpetrators’ awareness of the criminality of violence, lack of response from police and the legal system supposedly tasked with enforcing laws prohibiting violence, and perpetration of violence by the authorities themselves against women in order to pressure their male relatives.¹²

¹¹ Lahidji, Karim. “Exposing State Hypocrisy: Sexual Violence by Security Forces in Egypt.” *International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)*, June 2015, p.11, available at https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/egypt_report.pdf.

¹² Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights. “Violence Against Women in Egypt.” *UN Women*, available at: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/vaw/ngocontribute/Egyptian%20Center%20for%20Women_s%20Rights.pdf.

2. Domestic sphere

Christian women, especially converts, often face the most severe persecution at the hands of non-Christian family and community members who are respectful of the country's apostasy laws and traditions. A series of additional legal impasses and restrictions further trap the women in dangerous situations.

2.1 Domestic Violence

Men and women both report high rates of men's use of violence against women across Egyptian society, and for many it is socially and religiously justifiable. Over half of men and nearly half of women believe that women should tolerate violence to keep the family together,¹³ and that both men and women "essentially characterized wives as bearing the 'natural' brunt, through spousal violence, of men's stress and frustration."¹⁴ The Church itself is not immune to such ideology: Hannah*¹⁵ and Haroun*¹⁶ report increasing cases of Christian men resorting to violence against their wives and children as the pressure to provide increases with the soaring levels of unemployment. Another source reports the presence of incest, including in Christian families.¹⁷

Domestic violence is deeply ingrained beyond the fluctuations of the economy by the honor and revenge systems. Honor beatings and killings for conversion, for perceived 'sinful' behavior or for falling victim to rape are frequent. Although there is very little available reporting, the attitude towards this is exposed by the findings of the UN Women and Promundo *Understanding Masculinities* (2017) report: 62% of men and 49% of women surveyed believe that a woman or girl deserves physical punishment when their behavior is deemed to dishonor the family, and 90% of men saw their own and their family's honor as contingent on women's dress and behavior.¹⁸ As a result, few women report violence to the authorities and impunity is the norm even when it is reported. Even when honor violence results in

VIOLENCE IN CHRISTIAN FAMILIES

IN A CHRISTIAN FAMILY HANNAH WORKS WITH, THE WIFE EARNED A HIGHER SALARY THAN THE HUSBAND WHEN HIS EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES BECAME LIMITED. FEELING A LOSS OF CONTROL OVER THEIR ECONOMIC SITUATION, HE BEGAN TO TREAT HIS WIFE AND CHILDREN VIOLENTLY. THEIR DAUGHTER, AGED 17, IS SEEKING TO MARRY HER CHRISTIAN BOYFRIEND UNDERAGE IN ORDER TO ESCAPE THE LEVELS OF VIOLENCE.

¹³ "Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) – Middle East and North Africa." *Promundo and UN Women*, 2017, p.42, available at: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/5/understanding-masculinities-results-from-the-images-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

¹⁴ Promundo and UN Women, 2017, p.82-83.

¹⁵ Watson, Ruth. "Interview with Hannah, Cairo, Egypt." 9 Aug. 2017 (see also boxed story).

¹⁶ Watson, Ruth. "Interview with Haroun." 2017.

¹⁷ Unpublished Open Doors research, 2018.

¹⁸ Promundo and UN Women, 2017, p. 83-84.

death, 31% of men and 33% of women surveyed by UN Women/ Promundo believe that “Men who kill their female relatives for (so-called) honor should not be punished by law”.¹⁹

Christian women from a Muslim background are particularly vulnerable to violence at the hands of family: in a country where religion is often closely linked to family and ethnic identity and where individual autonomy is viewed negatively, conversion – which contravenes apostasy laws – can be perceived as a dishonor to the immediate and extended family. Domestic violence, sexual abuse and forced confinement to the house are common reprisals aimed at pressurizing Christians with a Muslim background to recant their new faith and practices (including prayer and reading the Bible).²⁰ Generalized harmful cultural attitudes and practices towards women are magnified for Christian women.

Escaping even a dangerously abusive marriage is very difficult and complex for Egyptian women, who must either forfeit all financial rights and child custody in a no-fault divorce (potentially leaving her destitute) or endure a long and costly court case, proving ‘harm’ (what constitutes ‘harm’ is at the discretion of the judge), in order to seek divorce.²¹ Muslim men, on the other hand, can simply divorce their wives verbally without her being present (unilateral repudiation) and, while divorced women do not face the stigma of never-married women, they may face some stigmatisation, poverty and find it extremely difficult to gain child custody.

Christian women are most acutely vulnerable in smaller cities and villages where there is little access to education for women and religious leaders. In the experience of those interviewed who work in women’s ministry, where there is good education and the Church is well-established, church leaders are able to empower women to challenge the levels of domestic violence and sexual abuse prevalent in homes and society. However, where pastors and priests have had little training in counselling and the rights of women, they perpetuate the norms of violence by advising women to remain calm and accept the treatment they receive at the hands of abusive husbands and other family members in order to keep their children, family and personal life stable. Families are split apart, even if there is no divorce, undermining the very foundation upon which Christian communities are built.

2.2 Conversion within the family

It is extremely difficult for for Christian women who convert to Islam (forcibly or of their own will) and wish to revert to Christianity, to obtain official recognition from the state of their conversion and for any name change, yet religion must be stated on an identity card. The bias towards the Muslim majority in law restricts Christian women’s legal status in inter-faith marriages and choice to marry: Muslim women may not marry Christian men, however Christian women may marry Muslim men, thus ensuring that the head of household, and any resulting children, will be legally Muslim. Where female converts to Christianity are unable to register as such, they remain legally Muslim and thus unable to marry Christian men.

¹⁹ Promundo and UN Women, 2017, p. 83-84.

²⁰ Watson, Ruth. “Interview with women’s rights activist, Brussels.” 8 May 2017.

²¹ “Circles of Hell: Domestic, Public and State Violence Against Women in Egypt.” Amnesty USA, Jan. 2015, p.28-29, available at: https://www.amnestyusa.org/files/mde_120042015.pdf.

In addition, the Family Status Law of 1955 stipulates that Christian women in inter-faith marriages are subject to Muslim Personal Status laws, have no automatic inheritance rights and, as explained above, divorce remains extremely complicated for Egyptian women. Even Christians in inter-denominational marriages are subject to Muslim Personal Status laws (if both spouses are from the same denomination they are subject to Christian Personal Status laws). This makes it difficult for women to escape forced and/or abusive marriages, and easy for men to divorce female converts to Christianity.

Aside from the shame felt by the family of a convert, the convert may also find herself arrested under blasphemy laws. One informant explained that families may hand converts over to the police themselves, and/ or the police may ask a family to discipline a convert to Christianity. She mentioned a student who converted and, when the police asked her family to discipline her, she was thrown to her death from a third floor window. Her death was reported as suicide.²² However, cases of murder of converts by their own family members are quite rare.

Exceptions to this are most often seen in wealthier areas of big cities where, as explained above, there is greater access to education. Hannah, whose ministry is based in Cairo, explains that education is fundamental to ending persecution against women in the family, citing the case of a highly educated family where the Christian wife is able to fully express and practice her faith just as her Muslim husband is able to. Nonetheless, their children are legally and socially expected to be raised as Muslim.

The private sphere is an area replete with hidden pressures and violence for Christian women. Whether forcibly married, or converts after marriage, practicing Christianity threatens the idea of male authority over every aspect of the household, including women's religious beliefs and physical safety. Even in Christian marriages, women are not always safe from abuse, undermining their personal resilience and health, and consequently the resilience and witness of the Church.

3. Societal and cultural sphere

Despite a growing economy, the recent political upheavals and economic instability in Egypt have resulted in soaring rates of youth unemployment (in particular for women)²³ and economic precariousness which, in turn, has put citizens under huge pressure, creating discontent and an environment that may increase the influence of radical Islamist groups and persecution of Christians.²⁴ These radical groups call for a return to strict Islamic doctrine and application of Sharia legislation in order to end the economic and political difficulties they ascribe to straying

²² Jackson, Olivia. "Interview with informant in Cairo." 31 May 2018.

²³ The 2017 ILO estimates youth unemployment (15-24 year olds) at 34.4% in Egypt. However, this figure disaggregates at 29.7% for men and 45% for women. Source: [World Bank](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.FE.ZS?locations=EG), available at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.FE.ZS?locations=EG>.

²⁴ "Country Dossiers: Egypt." Open Doors Analytical, *Open Doors*, May 2018, available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/EGYPT-WWR-COUNTRY-DOSSIER-May-2018-1.pdf> (password: freedom).

from the path of Islam.²⁵ The accompanying exploitation of Christians and of women's rights is masked by their religious rhetoric.

The long-standing, oppressive cultural patterns and use of religious ideology continue to plague women in Egypt today. The works of Egyptian women's activist, medical doctor and author Nawal al-Saadawi have revealed the damaging effects of this dynamic: distortions of religious values diminish the status of women and so, when part of a secondary vulnerable group (such as a minority religion, or through other factors such as illiteracy or poverty), discrimination is compounded.²⁶

3.1 Female Genital Mutilation

One such cultural practice enmeshed with religious ideology is female genital mutilation (FGM), tied to notions of the 'dangers' of women's sexuality. UNFPA states that "FGM serves no medical purpose, and it can lead to shock, haemorrhage, infection, chronic pain, complications in childbirth and even death, and it is internationally recognized as a violation of the rights of women and girls."²⁷ FGM predates both Islam and Christianity in Egypt, but often takes on a religious dimension.

Egypt still has some of the world's highest rates of FGM: an estimated 87.2% of women aged 15-49 have been cut (2015 figures).²⁸ Despite being made illegal in 2008, there have been no prosecutions of practitioners, apart from one doctor whose young 'patient' died. The doctor was initially acquitted before eventually being sentenced to two years in prison for manslaughter and three months for performing FGM.²⁹ FGM was upgraded from a misdemeanour to a felony in 2016 following another death. However, the law "can be circumvented by making reference to article 61 which allows for harmful actions in case of necessity to protect oneself or others. Medical necessity is therefore used as a reason for performing FGM. Thus, this practice has become medicalized instead of being banned or eliminated."³⁰

Prevalence varies across the country and according to wealth, and the practice does appear to be in decline amongst younger girls (97.1% of 45-49 year old women have undergone FGM, compared to 67.6% of 15-19 year olds) and the most wealthy (94.4% of women aged 15-49 in the lowest wealth brackets, as opposed to 69.8% of women in the highest wealth bracket).³¹ But the high rate of FGM generally would suggest both that mothers are complicit in having their daughters cut, and that it happens amongst the Christian population too. Without explicit,

²⁵ El Saadawi, Nawal. "The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World." *Zed Books*, 2016. Kindle Location 2203.

²⁶ El Saadawi, 2016. Kindle Locations 2314-2317

²⁷ "Efforts to End FGM Must Be Intensified, Leaders Urge." *United Nations Population Fund*, 17 Mar. 2017, available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/news/efforts-end-fgm-must-be-intensified>.

²⁸ "Egypt." *28 Too Many*, accessed Jan. 2018, available at: <https://www.28toomany.org/country/egypt/>.

²⁹ "Egyptian FGM Trial Convicts Doctor of Manslaughter." *BBC News*, 26 Jan. 2015, available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-30983027>.

³⁰ "Egypt: Situation Report on Violence Against Women." *Euromed Rights*, 2017. p.2, available at: <https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Factsheet-2017-VAW-Egypt-EN.pdf>.

³¹ 28 Too Many, 2018.

unified and consistent condemnation from Church leaders, this is unlikely to change soon, leaving another generation of Christian girls and women at risk.

One informant mentioned a pastor's wife who had had FGM performed on her when she was a young girl. The trauma and chronic pain of this had led her to hate her mother, who had had the procedure performed, and had created tensions between her and her husband, weakening the whole family.³² When FGM is common to a number of the women and girls, and by extension their families, in a Christian community, the whole community is directly or indirectly undermined by FGM.

3.2 Abduction, rape and forced marriage

Forced and coerced marriage is used to Islamize Christian women and girls, report Mariam*,³³ a local informant working with Orthodox girls. A local affiliate states that rates have recently spiked in rural villages of Upper Egypt and there are claims rates have risen across the country.³⁴ Coerced marriages are coordinated and planned, often beginning with subtle grooming and money before seducing a young girl into sexual relations before marriage which then gives grounds to press for marriage. Other local sources working with churches and pastors state that in the vast majority of cases Christian girls and women willingly leave their families to go with Muslim men, with only a few cases involving abduction or force.

Hannah, working with women in Cairo, confirms that they regularly work with girls and women aged 15-20 who fall in love with a Muslim boy or man and enter into sexual relations. Understanding the pressure they would face from family and community, they believe their only option is to run away and marry, converting to Islam in the process. In the majority of these cases, the women express regret after two to five years for their lost faith and the violence and problems they face in their marriages. It is at this stage, however, extremely complicated for them to return to Christianity as they risk losing their children or at worst being killed.

In other cases, poverty drives the decision: where Muslim communities are wealthier than local Christians, marriage to a Muslim man may seem like a way out of difficult circumstances for a girl. Neglect and abuse of girls by their families also play a part: the offer of marriage to a boy or

ABDUCTIONS

TWENTY-SIX-YEAR OLD MOTHER CHRISTINE LAMIE DISAPPEARED ON 7 APRIL 2018 AFTER RECEIVING THREATS ON FACEBOOK. HER HUSBAND, GIRGIS, FILED A REPORT WITH THE POLICE. WHEN HE CHECKED WITH THEM 4 DAYS LATER, HE WAS TOLD THAT HIS WIFE HAD VOLUNTARILY CONVERTED TO ISLAM. ACCORDING TO GIRGIS AND THE FAMILY'S PRIEST, CHRISTINE LOVES HER HUSBAND TWO CHILDREN AND HAS A STRONG CHRISTIAN FAITH. THEY FEEL SURE SHE HAS BEEN ABDUCTED AND FORCIBLY CONVERTED.

WORLD WATCH MONITOR DOCUMENTED THE CASES OF 7 CHRISTIAN WOMEN AND GIRLS, AND 2 BOYS, WHO HAD DISAPPEARED IN APRIL 2018 ALONE.

³² Jackson, Olivia. 2018.

³³ Watson, Ruth. "Interview with Mariam." 2017.

³⁴ The Egyptian Association of Victims of Abduction and Enforced Disappearances has reported as high as 550 abductions of Christian women and girls in the period 2015-2017 although it has not been verified with substantiated sources.

man who is kind to her can seem like an attractive option to a girl whose home life is unhappy or violent. It is important to state that not all of these marriages are necessarily coercive, however the shame felt by the girl's family at her actions may play a part as construing them as such.

A few women or girls are forcibly abducted.³⁵ A Christian girl in Minya was reportedly abducted by five men who stripped her naked and filmed her, threatening to release the video if she did not marry one of her attackers.³⁶ The BBC documented several such cases in 2010,³⁷ and members of the US Congress pressured the State Department to take up the issue with the Egyptian Government under the description of human trafficking.³⁸

The state and police may turn a blind eye to such cases: where a girl is married into a Muslim family she is immediately considered Muslim and no longer under the authority of her Christian family. If she manages to escape, she is often refused permission to change her identity papers back to 'Christian', and therefore, amongst other issues, finds herself unable to marry a Christian man (as stated above, while it is legal for a Muslim man to marry a Christian woman, a Muslim woman cannot marry a Christian man). In addition, particularly in rural and poorer areas, underage marriage is common, and the law preventing this is rarely enforced, including by officials who register the marriage.³⁹

A former member of a network set up for the purpose of abducting or seducing girls and young women confirms that this is a direct strategy of a number of Salafist groups, who seek to convert young women to Islam by holding them hostage until their eighteenth birthday, when they can legally change their religion without their parents' consent. Some of the girls are married off to Muslim men, although often not the man they fell in love with, while others are sent to Gulf States as domestic servants and are sexually exploited. The former group member explains that men are paid large sums of money for this, and that police are often paid off as well and may even assist the network.⁴⁰

The issue requires further investigation and an end to impunity for when crimes are committed: when cases vary from willing or coerced elopement to outright abduction and forced marriage, the shame of families, lack of verifiable statistical information and inaction of the state and police limit reporting.

³⁵ Boxed story: "Egypt's Disappearing Coptic Women and Girls." *World Watch Monitor*, 1 May 2018, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/05/egypts-disappearing-coptic-women-and-girls/>.

³⁶ Cunningham, Sara. "Christian Girls are being Abducted in Egypt, Never to Return." *Open Doors USA*, 2 Oct. 2017, available at: <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/christian-girls-abducted-egypt-never-return/>.

³⁷ Whewell, Tim. "Christian Minority Under Pressure in Egypt." *BBC News*, 17 Dec. 2010, available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-middle-east-12014779/christian-minority-under-pressure-in-egypt>.

³⁸ Abrams, Joseph. "House Members Press White House to Confront Egypt on Forced Marriages" *Fox News*, 21 Apr. 2010, available at: <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/house-members-press-white-house-to-confront-egypt-on-forced-marriages>.

³⁹ "Circles of Hell: Domestic, Public and State Violence Against Women in Egypt." *Amnesty USA*, Jan. 2015. p.27, available at: https://www.amnestyusa.org/files/mde_120042015.pdf.

⁴⁰ "Egypt: Ex-Kidnapper Admits 'They Get Paid for Every Coptic Christian Girl They Bring in'." *World Watch Monitor*, 10 Oct. 2017, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/09/egypt-ex-kidnapper-admits-get-paid-every-copt-christian-girl-bring/>.

3.3 Sexual abuse and harassment

In a climate of rampant harassment and sexual abuse of women and of public discrimination against Christian communities, Christian women are attacked, harassed and bullied on a regular basis. Attacking Christian women is a deliberate means to intimidate, humiliate and drive out the church or to coerce conversion into Islam.⁴¹ Women's freedom of movement is inhibited through fear of harassment when they leave the house.

Sexual harassment of women, including rape, is rife at all levels of society in Egypt, placing the country at the bottom of Arab states for women's rights:⁴² in 2013, UN Women published a study which found 99% of women had experienced sexual harassment.⁴³ Although such harassment is unwanted by women, more women than men blame the victim for inviting attention,⁴⁴ indicating the pervasiveness of cultural understandings of women, their behavior and role and their sexuality, and also the extent to which victims are shamed for having been attacked, which prevents many from speaking up or complaining to police about attacks. This blaming by other women may also be a way for women to distance themselves from their own vulnerability: if harassment only happens to women who 'provoke' it, it could never happen to women who behave within accepted norms.

Sexual abuse and harassment is a major challenge in the lives of Christian girls and women, particularly in villages and rural areas of Upper Egypt, where there are more isolated Christian families, and the north Sinai governorates affected by Islamic radical groups. Mariam explains that their dual low status as female and Christian makes them easier targets for intimidation and coercion to convert to Islam with the promise that they will enjoy greater protection and less vulnerability. UN Women/ Promundo state that 'traditionally in Egypt, rape is considered an attack, not just on an individual women [*sic*], but also against the men charged with her protection.'⁴⁵

In the words of UNICEF's report on sexual violence, in a culture where women espouse the cultural and spiritual values of the community, sexual violence 'erodes the fabric of a community in a way that few weapons can'.⁴⁶ Targeting Christian women is a deliberate action to degrade, humiliate and create fear amongst the entire Christian community.

Similarly, although community mob violence is for the most part carried out indiscriminately, the specificity in targeting women is the deliberate motive to humiliate the woman herself, dishonor her family and undermine the dignity of the Church. For example, the May 2016 mob attack on a 70-year old woman stripped and paraded naked through her village in Minya

⁴¹ Gilbert, Lela. "Gender-based Violence as an Expression of Christian Persecution in Muslim Lands." *World Watch Monitor*, 13 June 2013, p.10, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/old-site-imgs-pdfs/2533678.pdf>.

⁴² Boros, Crina. "Poll: Egypt Is Worst Arab State for Women, Comoros Best." *Thomson Reuters Foundation News*, 12 Nov. 2013, available at: <http://news.trust.org/item/20131108170910-qacvu/?source=spotlight-writaw>.

⁴³ "Study on Ways and Methods to Eliminate Sexual Harassment in Egypt." *UN Women*, Apr. 2013, available at: https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/harassmap/media/uploaded-files/287_Summaryreport_eng_low-1.pdf.

⁴⁴ Promundo and UN Women, 2017. p.42.

⁴⁵ Promundo and UN Women, 2017. p.84.

⁴⁶ *Sexual violence as a weapon of war*, UNICEF, 1996, available at: <https://www.unicef.org/sowc96pk/sexviol.htm>.

RECRIMINATIONS IN 2017

IN APRIL, A WOMAN WEARING A HIJAB ATTEMPTED TO CUT THE HAIR OF EGYPTIAN JOURNALIST RAHMA AS A REPRISAL FOR NOT COVERING HER HEAD.

IN A VIOLENT ATTACK IN MAY, POLICE REPORTED THAT AN UNKNOWN MAN ATTACKED THREE COPTIC GIRLS WHO WERE WEARING TROUSERS AS THEY WALKED HOME FROM A CHURCH IN NEARBY EZBET AL-NAKHL. THEY SUFFERED BURNS TO THEIR LEGS AFTER THE MAN THREW A CHEMICAL SUBSTANCE ON THEIR TROUSERS.

JULY: IT IS ALLEGED THAT THE MURDER OF NADRA MOUNIR, AGED 26, IN THE IMPOVERISHED CHRISTIAN-MAJORITY SUBURB OF ZARAYEB EZBET AL-NAKHL, WAS IN PART MOTIVATED BY A DESIRE TO INTIMIDATE WOMEN WHO DO NOT WEAR THE VEIL. COMMENTATORS DREW THIS CONCLUSION AS MRS MOUNIR'S HAIR WAS CUT IN THE ATTACK.

province was ascribed as a reprisal for an alleged affair between her son and a Muslim woman.⁴⁷ The case against her attackers was initially dropped for lack of evidence, and the woman's son was sentenced to a year in prison. However, the case was taken up again in April 2018.⁴⁸

The Church is stronger when pastors and leaders have good knowledge and education of such inequalities and respond by challenging those practices and attitudes within the church, thereby empowering members in turn to challenge sexual harassment in society. Hannah explains that the last six years have seen more churches actively speak out against sexual harassment in the larger cities as education increases, but also observes that more needs to be done in smaller cities and villages.⁴⁹

3.4 Dress codes

From the perception of Egyptian Muslim and Christian women, social pressure is growing regarding compliance with wearing the veil.⁵⁰ Although this may seem to some to be a choice between modesty or modernity, it is also an interwoven contest of politics, religion and culture being played out in the very way women present themselves in society.

Increasingly, both Muslim and Christian women and girls who do not comply with wearing the hijab or full veil find that they stand out and can be verbally insulted, spat at, threatened and have their hair forcibly cut or be subject to other demeaning treatment or physical attack.⁵¹ 2017 has seen several cases of recriminations for those who choose not to veil themselves (see box for specific cases⁵²). The attitude exists to some extent at all levels

⁴⁷ Associated Press. "Muslim mob in Egypt strips 70-year-old Christian woman." *The Guardian*, 26 May 2016, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/26/muslim-mob-in-egypt-strips-elderly-christian-woman-in-violent-attack>.

⁴⁸ "Egypt: Court Will Try 3 Men for Assault on Elderly Coptic Woman." *World Watch Monitor*, 25 Apr. 2018, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/egypt-court-will-try-3-men-for-assault-on-elderly-coptic-woman/>.

⁴⁹ Watson, Ruth. "Interview with Hannah, Cairo." 9 Aug. 2017.

⁵⁰ Watson, Ruth. "Interview with Hannah, Cairo." 9 Aug. 2017.

⁵¹ Tadros, Mariz. "Egypt's Women Have Had Enough of Being Told to Cover Up." *The Guardian*, 29 May 2012, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/may/29/egypt-women-cover-up-coptic>.

⁵² Sources: 1) Watson, Ruth. "Interview with Hannah, Cairo." 9 Aug. 2017. 2) and 3) "Murder of fifth Copt in six weeks creating 'state of fear and terror' among Egypt's Christians." *World Watch Monitor*, 12 July 2017, available

of society, and Egyptian women's campaign My Right cite surveys showing that "Egyptian men still believe that female clothes and behavior are the main 'reasons' for sexual harassment."⁵³

As in other countries, Egyptian women also indicate that although for many women wearing the veil is a choice (including for Christians who may choose to cover their hair), the issue has been systematically used by both Islamists and governments in recent years as a political battleground.⁵⁴ As an easily inflammatory issue, compliance with the hijab in particular is taken up at times by governments to instil an Islamic political agenda or to act as a smokescreen for larger political problems.

3.5 Female-headed households

Societal inequalities affecting Christian women are particularly acute for those who do not have the perceived protection of a husband, father or brother. This is especially true in the wake of violent incidents such as those carried out at the hands of so-called Islamic State. IS declared its intent to wipe out Egyptian Christians in February 2017, and this clearly includes removing men as husbands, sons and core members of the Church. The murder of Nadra Mounir (see box under Dress Codes), killed for her active involvement in the church and allegedly also for resisting Islamic dress codes, illustrates that women can also be directly targeted in deadly attacks to weaken the Church where they are viewed as active and core members.

Attacks on men have multiple effects on women: where men are killed, women are left as widows, to provide for their family in often precarious economic circumstances. They may lose inheritance left to them by their husband, despite a legal right to inherit. In a context where women have limited access to

2017 ATTACKS: THE CHALLENGE FOR WIDOWS

SAMIA ADLY WAS ON THE BUS ATTACKED BY ISIS ON ASCENSION DAY. SHE LOST HER HUSBAND, TWO SONS AND GRANDSON WHEN THE PERPETRATORS ATTACKED THE MEN AND BOYS. AFTER LOOTING SURVIVORS, THEY THEN FIRED RANDOMLY AND SAMIA LOST HER GRANDDAUGHTER AND SHE AND HER DAUGHTERS WERE INJURED.

SOHAIR SAAD NOW LOOKS AFTER HER FIVE GRANDCHILDREN AFTER HER SON AND DAUGHTER-IN-LAW WERE KILLED IN THE ATTACK.

HALLA QADRY FARES, THE WIFE OF NABIL SABER AYOUB MANSOUR, KILLED IN THE EL-ARISH AREA CONTROLLED BY THE IS-AFFILIATE GROUP SINAI PROVINCE, IS, WITH MANY CHRISTIANS DRIVEN OUT OF EL-ARISH, IN PORT SAID WITH HER TWO CHILDREN AND THOSE WHO HAVE FLED. SHE LIVES IN PRECARIOUS CONDITIONS AND HAS NOT RECEIVED GOVERNMENT SUPPORT.

at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/07/murder-of-fifth-copt-in-six-weeks-creating-state-of-fear-and-terror-among-egypts-christians/>.

⁵³ Hafez, Doaa. "How Can We Tackle Violence against Women in Egypt?" *British Council*, 16 Apr. 2015, available at: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/voices-magazine/how-can-we-tackle-violence-against-women-egypt>.

⁵⁴ Dalley, Jan. "Why Women's Bodies are a Political Battleground Again." *Financial Times*, 16 Sep. 2016, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/2aaba124-7b24-11e6-ae24-f193b105145e>.

employment, many are in informal domestic work. Many have never worked outside the home before. It is thus extremely challenging for Christian women to take over as the breadwinner. The family left behind also becomes more vulnerable to pressure to conversion to Islam in order to marry a Muslim and thus find a guardian and protector. Without a male head of the family, women are frequently disempowered and without standing in the community.⁵⁵

Where men survive, Haroun explains that the honor culture puts great pressure on men to enact revenge for attacks, in order to protect and defend their families. Christian family relationships are thus also put under great strain following the attacks. Haroun works with men who are traumatized by the dilemma of how to respond to atrocities committed against their family and community, the strain of which may result in domestic violence against their wife and children.

In the face of adversity, many Christian women have spoken of the hope and faith which has enabled them to forgive despite losses. Researchers in Egypt also reports changing relations with Muslim neighbours who have supported Christians who suffered in attacks and spoken out publicly to denounce the atrocities. However, as illustrated in the cases (sidebar) the lack of trauma counselling and protection from government authorities does not encourage recovery, justice and an end to hostilities.

3.6 Access to employment

Another area in which these cultural patterns can be seen is the prevalent mindset which promotes the notion of femininity as subservient and weak while regarding intelligent, educated, working women as a threat, although this varies according to levels of wealth and access to education, with a lower likelihood of this attitude amongst those who are wealthy, educated and urban. Women therefore have their access to justice, education and employment limited in comparison to that of men. In turn, the ingrained patriarchal views of masculinity, honor and revenge place enormous pressure on men to provide, defend and protect while simultaneously disempowering women to survive independently.⁵⁶ Instead of protecting against the perceived weaknesses of women, any patriarchal culture compounds and excuses discrimination against them. Egyptian men are strongly influenced by the prevalent societal view of masculinity which entails taking responsibility for providing for family needs. UN Women and Promundo's 2017 report looking at attitudes to masculinity and gender in the Middle East and North Africa states that:

Men are resistant to women working outside the home, and to their participation in aspects of political and public life.... Economic uncertainty and women's low labour-market participation mean that men face tremendous pressure to be providers. Almost 80 per cent of men are the main breadwinners for their family. More than half of men

⁵⁵ Boxed stories: 1) [“Four years after revolution Egypt’s Copts ask: ‘Where is our government?’](https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/06/four-years-revolution-egypts-copts-ask-government/) *World Watch Monitor*, 22 May 2017, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/06/four-years-revolution-egypts-copts-ask-government/>; 2) [“Sinai: eighth El-Arish Copt killed in targeted attack.”](https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/eighth-el-arish-copt-killed-during-targeted-attack/) *World Watch Monitor*, 8 May 2017, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2017/05/eighth-el-arish-copt-killed-during-targeted-attack/>.

⁵⁶ Watson, Ruth. “Interview carried out with informant in Cairo, Egypt.” 9 Aug. 2017.

reported frequently feeling stressed due to lack of work, and worried about not being able to meet their family's daily needs.⁵⁷

Restrictive views of masculinity can leave men, including Christian men, with a sense of emasculation and diminished self-esteem when they are unable to earn enough to meet his family's basic needs. In cases where a woman's career is more successful or she becomes the breadwinner, some men feel that as an extension of this ideology, she is supplanting his natural role as provider.⁵⁸ In addition, claims Egyptian women's campaign My Right, "male unemployment accounts for much of the aggressive behavior at home. Unemployed men tend to be violent to prove that they are still in control, despite the fact that they don't contribute to the household income."

This context of uncertainty and strain often engenders violence and, when it happens in Christian families, it weakens the Church's response to broader patterns of violence.

4. State sphere

Egyptian Constitution, 2014:⁵⁹

Article 9. Equal opportunity

The state ensures equal opportunity for all citizens without discrimination.

Article 11. The place of women, motherhood and childhood

The state commits to achieving equality between women and men in all civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights in accordance with the provisions of this constitution.... The state commits to the protection of women against all forms of violence, and ensures women empowerment to reconcile the duties of a woman toward her family and her work requirements.

Article 53. Equality in public rights and duties

Citizens are equal before the law, possess equal rights and public duties.... The state shall take all necessary measures to eliminate all forms of discrimination, and the law shall regulate the establishment of an independent commission for this purpose.

Despite these Constitutional guarantees and Egypt's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), this equality and protection is rarely realized, including in the content of national laws. Examples of this can be seen, for instance, in the legal loopholes surrounding FGM as discussed in Section 3.1 above. The Penal Code definitions of rape, sexual assault and harassment fail to take into account the full spectrum of forms these crimes take (Articles 267, 268, 269 and 289), and allows for a reduced sentence

⁵⁷ Promundo and UN Women, 2017. p.42.

⁵⁸ Promundo and UN Women, 2017. p.52.

⁵⁹ Egyptian Constitution 2014. *Constitute Project*, available at: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Egypt_2014?lang=en, accessed Feb. 2018.

(Article 17) or even pardoning (Article 60) for domestic violence and honor crimes when committed ‘in good faith’, and marital rape is not recognized at all.⁶⁰

Lack of political will does not help. In 2016, an MP argued for greater penalties for women than men in adultery cases, on the basis that women always bear the responsibility.⁶¹

Women’s illiteracy, lack of knowledge of their rights and discriminatory cultural norms further their *de facto* inequality. Coupled with being a Christian, a woman’s chance of being treated equally under the law diminishes greatly.

Violence, in some cases, has even been inflicted by state agents. The Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights report that “some Egyptian police deliberately use women as pawns in their actions against male relatives suspected of crimes” and refers to the perpetration of violence against women as ‘systematic’.⁶² Numerous instances of women protesters being arrested and sexually assaulted, including being photographed naked by male officers and undergoing forced ‘virginity testing’ by male military doctors, were documented during and following the 2011 revolution. A senior army general justified the tests by saying that, “we didn’t want [the women] to say we had sexually assaulted or raped them, so we wanted to prove they weren’t virgins in the first place.”⁶³ In 2015, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) released a report detailing ongoing assaults by state security forces well after the revolution and following successive regime changes.⁶⁴

New parliamentary quotas and a sharp increase from 2% female representation in 2012 to 15% (89 female MPs) in 2018 herald some hope for greater female participation in politics and policy-making, and 2014/15 saw Hala Shukrallah become the first woman and first Christian to lead a political party. However, as long as representation for women and Christians remains low, drafting of laws and their implementation is likely to continue discriminating against the rights of Christian women to the favour of men and the Muslim majority. The impact of limitations to community- and national-level political participation of Christian women means that the Church loses up to 50% of its potential voice in civil society.

President al-Sisi declared 2017 ‘the year of women’. Laws passed in December 2017 guarantee women’s right to inheritance, with jail sentences for those who prevent women from claiming their legal inheritance. However, a bill protecting women against violence was not passed.⁶⁵ In a recent international youth forum that was held in Egypt in November 2018, President Sisi stressed the need to empower women and make a considerable space for them in public life activities. However, the gap between public statements as such, and implementing practices to bring about real change to the issue, remains too wide.

⁶⁰ “[Egypt: Situation Report on Violence Against Women](https://euomedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Factsheet-2017-VAW-Egypt-EN.pdf).” *Euomed Rights*, 2017. p.1, available at: <https://euomedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Factsheet-2017-VAW-Egypt-EN.pdf>.

⁶¹ *Euomed Rights*, 2017. p.2.

⁶² Egyptian Center for Women’s Rights

⁶³ Coleman, Isobel. “[‘Virginity Tests’ and the Abuse of Egypt’s Women](http://edition.cnn.com/2011/OPINION/06/01/coleman.egypt.women/index.html).” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 1 June 2011, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/OPINION/06/01/coleman.egypt.women/index.html>.

⁶⁴ FIDH, 2015.

⁶⁵ *Al-Monitor*, Dec. 2017, available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/12/egypt-women-achievements-rights-laws-2017.html>, last accessed 10 Oct. 2018. (Please note; Al-Monitor articles are archived and made inaccessible quickly.)

4.1 State education

Enrolment rates to primary and secondary state education are generally increasing, but literacy rates (age 15+ can read and write) remain low at 65.4% among women (compared to 82.2% for men),⁶⁶ and are much lower in rural areas and poor areas of big cities where quality education is limited and classes are often overcrowded. Compounding this is the discrimination faced by Christians in the education system.

Where competition for employment is strong, those with the lowest social status and the least education are more likely to miss out – in this case, poorer Christian women.

While the above scenario is generally the case, inequalities facing women can vary according to levels of wealth and between regions: women living in rural villages of Upper Egypt or poor areas of Cairo and Alexandria often suffer the lowest social standing and most acute inequalities.⁶⁷

For Christian women and girls, facing the dual discrimination of their faith and their gender in schools, lack of education compounds other difficulties they encounter. It not only impacts their economic opportunities, especially if they become the head of a household or its primary earner, but also their ability to seek justice for persecutory or discriminatory acts, decreased ability to participate in ministry and to read the Bible for themselves, and thus draw solace at times of great pressure.

4.2 Impunity

Throughout the recent political upheavals, the authorities have failed to take meaningful action to tackle the underlying causes of violence against women and girls, nor have they addressed violence targeted against Christians. Although President al-Sisi's government has made pledges to tackle inequalities and violence against women and has amended some laws, as above, reforms for women's rights have been slow and token efforts rather than concerted implementation. The Jerusalem Post ascribes delays to strong opposition from institutions and lobbies,⁶⁸ while Human Rights Watch have pointed to a deliberate repression of civil society, including the arrest and interrogation of Azza Soliman, founder of the Center for Egyptian Women's Legal Assistance.⁶⁹

The use of customary law and reconciliation sessions to deal with sectarian disputes, including some cases of murder, abduction and interfaith sexual or emotional relationships (or suspected relationships), does not work in the favour of Christian women. The Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights report that:

⁶⁶ "The World Factbook: EGYPT." *Central Intelligence Agency*, (2015 estimate), available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html>, accessed February 2018.

⁶⁷ Watson, Ruth. "Interview with women's rights activist, Brussels." 8 May 2017.

⁶⁸ Frantzman, Seth J. "The Struggle for Women's Rights in Egypt." *The Jerusalem Post*, 9 Mar. 2017, available at: <https://www.jpost.com/Magazine/The-struggle-for-womens-rights-in-Egypt-483059>.

⁶⁹ "Egypt: Consolidating Repression Under al-Sisi." *Human Rights Watch*, 12 Jan. 2017, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/01/12/egypt-consolidating-repression-under-al-sisi>.

these reconciliations undermine the basic human right to a fair trial, enshrined in international law and the Egyptian constitution....

With time, these sessions have evolved into a parallel judicial system competing with the official justice system, and customary reconciliation has become a means to evade the enforcement of the law. This is because in these sessions the side with the greater tribal or group presence can impose its own terms, which in some cases explicitly include penalties for those who would exercise their constitutional and legal right to seek redress with the courts.

These sessions lack a vital principle essential to their effectiveness in containing sectarian disputes: the consent of both parties to the dispute to resolve the disagreement through customary reconciliation... As such, state institutions, which should ostensibly protect citizens' rights, become a party to the dispute.⁷⁰

Some cases do not get as far as a court case of any kind. The parents of abducted girls complain that their reports to the police were met with inaction, even when evidence and leads to perpetrators were available.⁷¹ Other women who report violence against them are told that it is normal, or not listened to unless they have witnesses.⁷²

The lack of publicly-available statistical information and disaggregated data by relevant factors, including religion, makes it difficult to assess and address the extent of violence against women and girls as a whole,⁷³ and therefore also the nature and extent of religiously-motivated violence against Christian women and girls. The fact that many Christians in Egypt (particularly those who are not wealthy) face hindrances in recourse to justice for crimes committed against them for their faith, combined with the lack of legal protection and punishment for violence against women, and the reluctance of some (not all) officials to prosecute crimes against women or Christians (even perpetuating harassment and violence themselves at times), makes Christian women less likely to seek or obtain any form of redress. Where their access to education and economic life is hampered by gender and religious discrimination, and violent incidents remove the main breadwinner and household leader, they are increasingly vulnerable to violence themselves and less able to seek justice. Recourse itself is also crucial to psychological recovery and future resilience.

⁷⁰ "Whose Customs? The Role of Customary Reconciliation in Sectarian Disputes and State Responsibility." *Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights*, 10 June 2015, available at: <https://eipr.org/en/press/2015/06/%e2%80%9cwhose-customs-role-customary-reconciliation-sectarian-disputes-and-state>.

⁷¹ "Egypt's Disappearing Coptic Women and Girls." *World Watch Monitor*, 1 May 2018, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/05/egypts-disappearing-coptic-women-and-girls/>.

⁷² Jackson, Olivia. 2018.

⁷³ "Circles of Hell: Domestic, Public and State Violence Against Women in Egypt." *Amnesty International*, 2015. p. 7, available at: https://www.amnestyusa.org/files/mde_120042015.pdf.

5. Conclusion

The intersection of domestic, societal and legal discrimination with religious persecution intensifies the impact on vulnerable members of society in Egypt, notably on the female members of the Christian Church.

Even when women face violence, discrimination or harmful traditions within a Christian context or family, this creates pressure on them which fractures families and weakens them. As the Church is made up of families, this ultimately undermines the whole body, leaving the Church less resilient to broader patterns of persecution.

As can be seen in Figure 3, when taken as a whole the multiple factors which affect women and girls, including but not limited to persecution, form an interconnected web from which it is hard to break free when each issue is affected by, and in turn affects, other issues.

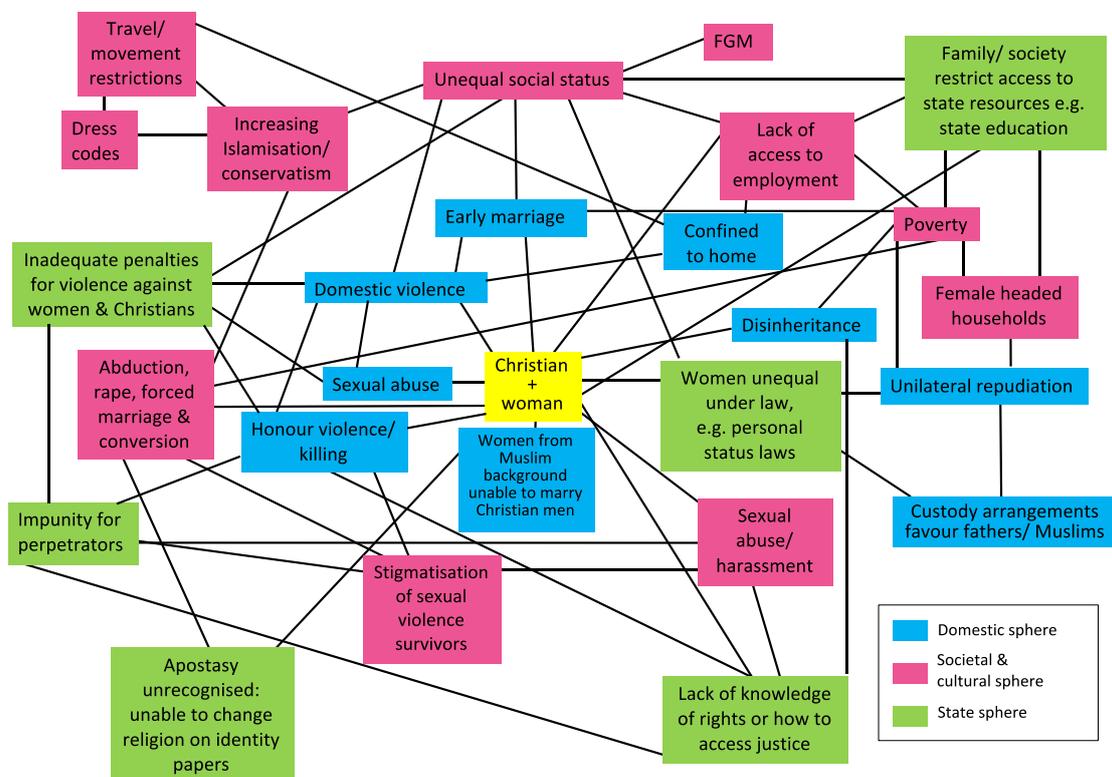


Figure 3: Intersecting vulnerabilities of women, and especially Christian women, in Egypt.

The prevalent cultural and ideological concepts of masculinity and femininity have long weakened the position of women in society and are underpinned by legal restrictions and inequalities. Christian women and girls are, in this context, vulnerable church members who are strategically targeted in order to humiliate the Christian community at large, sow fear and insecurity and, in the most severe cases, to drive the Church out, with the least risk of reprisal for aggressors. Women are robbed of their choice to convert and trapped by legal impasses and impunity in cycles of violent and, at times, lethal discrimination. Obstacles to education, employment and political participation reduce the resilience of women to the consequences of

the frequent deadly attacks and disempower them to challenge and report sexual and physical violence which is committed both in public and the home. The consequence is that they are less likely to be contributing or continuing members of the Christian community.

However, opportunities for girls and women in education and employment have been key to changing communities in Egypt where Christian women enjoy greater levels of equality and security. “Changes related to women are the most critical changes in any culture and any country. You can easily give men freedom, but giving freedom to women is something remarkable,” states Rev. Dr Andrea Zaki, head of Egypt’s Protestant community.⁷⁴

When Church leaders and members have access to education on gender equality, they hold the tools to correct distorted notions of masculinity and femininity, thereby empowering women and men together to challenge the prevalent cultural attitudes, along with other root causes of discrimination, sexual abuse and violence against women and girls within and outside of the Church. They can build the resilience of the Church by ensuring for women literacy, education, safety within Christian homes and active participation in church, community and political life.

⁷⁴ “Giving Freedom to Women Is Something Remarkable’ – Egypt’s Protestant Head.” *World Watch Monitor*, 25 Apr. 2018, available at: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2018/04/giving-freedom-to-women-is-something-remarkable-egypts-protestant-head/>.