

Targeting the next generation of the church:

The challenges that face Christian children and youth

In September 2021, Open Doors World Watch Research (WWR) released preliminary findings on the unique challenges facing Christian children and youth of the persecuted church.¹ The report found that, in the 50 countries listed where Christians face the highest levels of persecution, young people are isolated, harshly treated, and pressured to conform to majority identities. The goal – to weaken the church in the generations to come.



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Matti² is a good example of how this pressure operates. He was born into a Christian family in Iraq, under the rule of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party. While he was still young, his parents divorced, and his mother remarried a Muslim. According to the law, Matti automatically became Muslim when his mother remarried and converted to her new husband's religion. This new religious identity legally became part of Matti's official record. However, in his heart, Matti still held on to a faith in Jesus.

When Matti was 25, he met a Christian woman whom he hoped to marry. Unfortunately, because he was technically a Muslim, the woman's family rejected him. His legal identity meant that any children of their marriage would by law also be considered Muslim. Matti still hoped to marry and raise children in his chosen religion of Christianity. Unfortunately, this happened once more and Matti's proposal of marriage to a Christian woman was rejected for the same reason.

Decisions made for Matti as a youth continue to impact his freedom to practice his religion and raise a family in the faith of his choice.

In general, persecution and discrimination target individuals where they are most vulnerable. This leaves Christian children and youth – including those in their formative years who are still developing their life choices – particularly exposed to persecution. Primarily reliant on the protection of adults and often lacking the physical or legal resources to protect themselves, they can be 'soft targets' for persecutors. Their suffering is especially unseen or invisible in societies where age equals status.

Matti never did find a woman whose family would allow her to marry him. His dream of raising children and passing on the faith which is so important to him has died. Now aged 45 – nearly two generations after his mother remarried – Matti's family status continues to be defined by one law regarding a

¹ 'Children and Youth Specific Religious Persecution 2021: Preliminary findings from 50 countries'. Available at: https://www.opendoors.org/Childrens_Report. An updated report on Children and Youth Specific Religious Persecution is scheduled for release on 1 September 2022.

² Name changed for security reasons.

child's religious registration. In a society where becoming a father gives status and a place of belonging, this law has shaped much of the course of his life and identity.

Equally sobering from the September 2021 report is the finding that for many young Christians of today, the persecution they face is of a more violent nature. It is deeply unsettling to think of the boys and girls of the church being attacked and, in extreme circumstances, killed. Unfortunately, this is a reality for many Christian youth.

Across the 50 countries researched, Christian girls live in fear of sexual violence, be it in a domestic environment hostile to their faith, in their local communities or at the hands of extremists. Whilst Christian boys are not immune from the threat of sexual violence, they primarily risk physical beatings or being forced into the ranks of militias or armed gangs. For both genders, Christian children and youth are at risk of being forced to flee their homes, and of being trafficked.

A statement from an Open Doors expert on youth in the Middle East serves as a suitable conclusion:

“If a Church is full of people who have all experienced persecution within all these systems from a young age, the Church will essentially be so wounded that it can't impact society or exist in certain spaces and spheres at all, leaving the Church completely vulnerable and set up for more extreme persecution or to just fade into the shadows.”

Education: The top challenge facing young Christians

In virtually all of the countries where Christians face the highest levels of persecution, Christian children and youth face discrimination and harassment in educational settings. For most people, school is a time of learning and friendship. Yet it can be the place where isolation, violence and shame are most keenly felt by Christian children and youth. They are singled out as different, bullied, marked down on graded assessments or even denied scholarships. In extreme cases, they are forced out of school, with a devastating impact on the rest of their lives.

Education goes a long way to determine a child's path to financial and social security, without which the new adult generation will be even more vulnerable to numerous forms of pressure and discrimination coming from those who are hostile to their Christian faith.