



# SAME FAITH, DIFFERENT PERSECUTION

WWR 2021 GSRP Report

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## Key findings

*Around the world, the crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic has made the vulnerable even more vulnerable. In 2020, gender-specific religious persecution (GSRP) rose to the highest level this annual study has recorded over the last three years, with women often experiencing higher potential for risk than men. The top Pressure Points for Christian men and women reflect established patterns of GSRP. Below are five specific findings from the WWR 2021 GSRP Report:*

**The crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates existing vulnerabilities.** Over the last year Pressure Points<sup>1</sup>, such as deadly violence, targeted seduction and physical attacks, increased. In domestic situations, pandemic lockdowns led to increased physical attacks on Christians isolated in their homes with hostile family members who disapprove of their faith. In Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, criminal groups and militias exploited COVID-related vulnerabilities and intensified their criminal activity, persecuting Christians with increased impunity.

**GSRP occurs at a higher rate in countries experiencing conflict.** For Christian men, the risk of abduction, death and forced conscription into military ranks or militias escalates sharply. Women are more likely to be trafficked, seduced or forced to flee the country, in addition to facing an increased chance of abduction.

**Reports of the Pressure Points “psychological violence” and “trafficking” increased for women.** The rise in psychological violence mostly affects women and girls, who often live in fear of attacks or struggle to move on from the trauma of past physical and sexual assaults. Women also are primarily impacted by the rise in human trafficking, although bonded labor and trafficking continue to impact men and boys too.

**Shame dynamics are key factors in making GSRP effective against Christian men and women.** Christian men report being shamed and denigrated when they are detained and physically beaten or discriminated against within the workplace. Sexual violence and forced marriage are used as tools of shame, coercion and control, primarily against Christian women and girls because of the strong association of sexual purity with the honor of a family or community.

**Individual attacks on men and women target the family and the Christian community.** Attacks target the areas most vulnerable to individuals—often what their society considers the role or value of men and women. For example, because Christian men are often family leaders, financial providers and church leaders, they are often targeted in an attempt to inflict harm on the wider Christian family and community. Sexual violence, trafficking and forced marriage were used even more widely than the previous year—actually weaponizing women’s bodies to inflict harm on their minority Christian communities and limit growth of the church.



<sup>1</sup> Gender-specific religious persecution “Pressure Points” include aspects of both pressure and violence, which are analyzed separately in Open Doors’ World Watch List standard methodology and literature.

# Introduction

The universal human right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is of vital importance,<sup>2</sup> both for its own sake, and for its role in underpinning other human rights.<sup>3</sup> This past year in 2020, acts of discrimination, harassment and violence have threatened FoRB at new levels of intensity in more than 50 countries.

Complicating these threats to FoRB is the difficult reality that such violations are not gender-blind. Christian religious minorities in 54 countries experience severe levels of persecution for their faith.<sup>4</sup> The intersection of religious vulnerabilities with pervasive, destructive forms of gender inequality and violence creates what World Watch Research calls gender-specific religious persecution (GSRP).

GSRP and discrimination can be intentionally and strategically weaponized to inflict harm upon entire Christian families and communities—beyond the immediately visible victim. While the increase in the top Pressure Points facing Christian men and Christian women reflects enduring and concerning patterns, it also reveals an increase in psychological violence and trafficking. This increase also offers insight into how the intersection of gender and religion intensifies persecution and discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To address such multi-faceted issues, this report recommends paths for confronting such oppression, both for local faith actors<sup>5</sup> and those working at the crossroads of policy and faith.

As it has over the last three years, the fourth annual report on GSRP focuses on Open Doors' World Watch List of the top 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian and builds on the work of the Open Doors' World Watch Research team (WWR) that investigates and compiles the World Watch List each year.<sup>6</sup>

## Methodology

For the 2021 GSRP Report, the GSRP analytical team gathered and analyzed data using a mixed methods approach.<sup>7</sup> During the reporting period (October 1, 2019, to September 30, 2020), Open Doors World Watch Research monitored religious persecution dynamics in more than 100 countries. GSRP analysts studied data from the 74 countries where persecution is high, very high or extreme.<sup>8</sup> This report primarily presents analysis of the top 50 countries on Open Doors' 2021 World Watch List. However, some findings additionally draw from countries that rank 51 – 74 in the pool of countries monitored by Open Doors, particularly in describing regional trends.



Dalia and her husband, Syria.

The data GSRP specialists use comes from Open Doors' field staff and field contributors, external experts and WWR persecution analysts. As a part of the data collection process, regionally based experts collected qualitative data from trauma specialists, church leaders, focus groups and experts. Additionally, the report also offers information based on interviews with Christian men and women who have experienced violence for their faith.<sup>9</sup> By nature, qualitative research is limited, and respondents' open-ended feedback allows for subjectivity that can limit the quality of the response and ease with which it can be analyzed. Further, limitations on the collection of gender-specific information stem from stigma and feelings of shame surrounding gender-based violence. For many Christian men and Christian women, reporting sexual violence is unspeakably difficult or dangerous. Not only is speaking out often too risky for survivors, but interviews can also present grave dangers to their mental health, re-traumatizing victims.

Conversely, increased awareness of GSRP dynamics among those who contribute information to the questionnaires (due to training sessions and the publication of these reports over the past four years) may drive an increase in reporting of related issues. As such, identified rises in the prevalence of Pressure Points may, in part, reflect increased reporting, rather than an increase in actual cases.

The GSRP analytical team analyzed the resulting data to reveal how often Christian men and women experience the various Pressure Points, including qualitative descriptions of these incidents in specific contexts. Qualitative input was filtered through a framework of 30 Pressure Points. This framework has been refined over the last four years of conducting the research and publishing the GSRP Report. The statistics allow researchers to observe and track overall trends in the patterns and dynamics of global religious persecution and discrimination.

A more detailed description of the methodology, including an in-depth outline of the Pressure Points framework and corresponding definitions, can be found at Open Doors Analytical.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Article 18, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. United Nations General Assembly, December 16, 1966.

<sup>3</sup> Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians, Final Report and Recommendations.

<sup>4</sup> Categorized by World Watch Research as extreme or very high levels of persecution. World Watch List 2021: Compilation of all Main Documents, World Watch Research, January 2021.

<sup>5</sup> "Local faith actors" include religious leaders, institutions, communities and faith-inspired organizations with a religious purpose operating at a national or sub-national level in a country.

<sup>6</sup> Complete World Watch List findings (since WWL 2013) can be viewed [here](#). [password: freedom]

<sup>7</sup> A mixed methods approach combines elements of both qualitative and quantitative research.

<sup>8</sup> Complete WWL Methodology, p.106.

<sup>9</sup> In the WWL 2021 reporting period, travel restrictions and other measures introduced by the governments of various countries to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic did cause delays and create the need for restructuring grassroots research in some cases. Through the agile cooperation of Open Doors field networks, research analysts, external experts and an increased use of technological options, Open Doors is confident that the WWL 2021 scoring, analysis and documentation maintained required levels of quality and reliability.

<sup>10</sup> For the longer methodology, as well as all publications on gender-specific religious persecution, see Open Doors Analytical [password: freedom]

# 2021 Gender-Specific Pressure Points

GSRP rose to the highest level this project has recorded since its beginnings in 2018, with women often at higher risk than men. Across the top 50 countries on the 2021 World Watch List, there was a 12 percent increase in the overall reported number of Pressure Points for men over the previous year, and a 5 percent increase for women—confirming a global increase in the overall persecution of Christians (noted by World Watch researchers).<sup>11</sup> This year, for the first time, all top 50 countries scored in the ‘very high’ persecution category, outlined in WWL methodology.<sup>12</sup> Research for the World Watch List reveals that more than 340 million Christians worldwide experience high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.

Year over year, the persecution that men and women face because of their faith frequently and consistently manifests itself in set groups of Pressure Points in recurring and established patterns. These gender-specific patterns again align with the expected roles that Christian men or women play in their local context.

**GSRP of women: complex, hidden and violent. GSRP of men: focused, severe and visible.**

– GSRP Analysis and Implications, March 2018

In addition to the crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, conflict (political unrest, extremist insurgencies, military invasion and more) has also exacerbated gender-specific vulnerabilities; therefore GSRP was

reported at a higher rate in countries experiencing conflict.<sup>13</sup> Some 50 percent of all Pressure Points for women and 51 percent for men came from these countries—these conflict-ridden countries make up 44 percent of the top 50 WWL countries.<sup>14</sup>

## 2021 Top Pressure Points: Male

Consistent with previous findings, physical violence, economic harassment at work/job/business and imprisonment by the state once again rank highest among forms of persecution and discrimination targeting men and boys. Research findings reaffirm that men and boys are targeted in their capacity as community and family leaders, as financial providers and as protectors. Respondents explain that removing or limiting a man’s (or boy’s) ability to provide for his family through his work—whether it is through job loss, imprisonment or physical attack—weakens his dependent family and leaves them vulnerable, as well as shames the man/boy who is unable to provide.

Additionally, physical assaults consistently target church leaders, who are predominantly male. Because of their visibility as community leaders, church leaders are particularly pursued. A persecution expert on Central Asia explains: “The state regards pastors and church leaders as primary targets they can exploit to control Christian activities. [Church leaders]

are often used as examples to show other Christians the treatment they can expect. When churches are raided, church leaders are primarily the ones who are detained, interrogated, fined and harassed.”

**“In most cases, men are the breadwinners of the family. If a man is unable to provide for his family due to persecution, his family will be in huge trouble financially. In remote areas of Sudan, men are also the security providers for their respective families. His absence could lead to looting of family property and sexual attacks on his wife and daughters.”**

–In-country expert on Sudan

The reports show that the top Pressure Points (see below) for men are, in general, severe and easily visible in society. While Christian men experience fewer overall Pressure Points compared to Christian women, their persecution is more likely to be seen because these incidents commonly occur in the public sphere. This reflects the predominately patriarchal societies that make up the top 50 WWL countries, in which men assume public roles while women often stay home. Researchers graded each Pressure Point, according to the level of severity. A total of 6.7 percent of Pressure Points ranked as “very severe” for men, compared to 3.8 percent for women—an indication that Christian men and boys more commonly die for their faith, despite women and girls being more vulnerable to so-called “honor killings.”

**Men: The highest-ranking 5 Pressure Points (in the top 50 WWL countries)**

Rank	Pressure Point	2021*	2020
1	Violence – physical	86%	82%
2(tied)	Economic harassment via work/job/business	74%	66%
2(tied)	Imprisonment by government	74%	66%
4	Violence – psychological	66%	56%
5	Military/militia conscription/forced service against conscience	56%	40%

12% increase in total number of Pressure Points since 2020

\*The statistics in this column indicates the percentage of countries in the WWL top 50 reporting a Pressure Point as characteristic of the experience of persecution for Christian men or boys.

## 2021 Top Pressure Points: Female

Women and girls continue to experience forced marriage and sexual violence at alarming rates. A staggering 90 percent of countries reported incidents of forced marriage, usually

<sup>11</sup> This rise may also, in part, reflect an increased awareness of issues pertaining to GSRP among field staff and country experts, resulting in higher reporting rates of Pressure Points.

<sup>12</sup> Complete WWL Methodology, p.96.

<sup>13</sup> Conflict in areas of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Asia correlated strongest with an increase in GSRP. Although sub-Saharan Africa experienced conflict in more countries than anywhere else.

<sup>14</sup> Determination for inclusion as “conflict-ridden countries” came from International Crisis Group’s country profiles, in conjunction with the Global Conflict Tracker. See [here](#) and [here](#).

as a means of pressuring Christian converts to return to their family or majority community religion.<sup>15</sup> Some 70 percent of the countries that reported sexual violence indicated that sexual assault was “moderately widespread” among persecuted Christian women and girls, as opposed to a small number of isolated cases.<sup>16</sup> Sexual violence is, therefore, a prevalent means of exerting power and control over women, whether or not it is accompanied by a formal marriage contract.

The data reveals that militants and other extremists (and sometimes community members) rape Christian girls and women, as a way of bringing dishonor and shame upon her and the wider Christian family. In some instances, females are raped in front of their husbands, children and parents. A country expert from the Central African Republic explains, “This violence is a persecution weapon, a way of making Christian women vulnerable and also traumatizing the community.”

Leah<sup>17</sup>, a woman in her 30s from rural northern Kenya, experienced this trauma through an attack on her oldest daughter, Hubba. Her family had become Christians less than two years before, and they are the only Christian family in their vicinity. Last year, during a Muslim celebration, Hubba, a young teen, was raped by a member of the village. Afterward, village elders tried to convince Hubba to marry her attacker. Apart from the horror of the situation, Leah knew this “solution” for justice would also require her to convert to her husband’s religion. He would also not be held accountable for the attack. Leah was even more determined to refuse. The young man was arrested and is currently awaiting trial.

In the Arabian Peninsula, the ill-treatment of foreign workers, including sexual abuse, remains a major issue. According to an expert on socio-cultural dynamics in the region, the marginalization of females, Christians and migrant workers places foreign Christian domestic workers at particular risk. Although not exclusively faith-related, many Christian domestic migrant workers, almost all of whom are female, experience sexual abuse.

The top five Pressure Points (combined) for women underscore how the subordinate role of women and girls within the family and community is exploited for religious persecution and discrimination. Females can be married without their consent, raped and beaten behind closed doors, and divorced and disinherited overnight. Reports of physical violence increased by 31 percent compared to 2020’s GSRP report. The increase reflects the reality that in a year of global lockdown, domestic violence was increasingly used as a tool to control women, particularly Christian converts. The Pressure Points facing Christian women and girls tend to be more hidden compared to the public visibility of how men experience persecution—occurring in the home behind closed doors or worse.<sup>18</sup> Tragically, in many countries, the top Pressure Points for women have become so culturally

accepted that perpetrators make little to no attempt to hide their actions.

Persecution against Christian women and girls also continues to be more complex; whereas men in the top 50 countries experienced an average of 7.3 Pressure Points, women in these same countries experienced an average of 9.5 per country. This indicates that across the top 50 countries on the World Watch List, Christian females experience a greater breadth of Pressure Points (with the exception of Latin America, where the average falls to 6.1).

**Women: The highest ranking 5 Pressure Points (in the top 50 WWL countries)**

Rank	Pressure Point	2021*	2020
1	Forced marriage	90%	84%
2	Violence – sexual	86%	84%
3	Violence – physical	84%	64%
4	Violence – psychological	74%	40%
5	Forced Divorce	70%	64%

5% increase in Pressure Points since 2020

\*The statistics in this column indicates the percentage of countries in the WWL top 50 reporting a Pressure Point as characteristic of the experience of persecution for Christian women and girls.

**Pressure Points of Particular Concern**

Several Pressure Points rose sharply over last year, affecting both men and women and fueling increasing concern.

Violence – death

In 24 of the top 50 countries, killings of Christian men were reported, representing a 26 percent rise since 2020.<sup>19</sup> Deaths of women were recorded in 20 countries, reflecting an increase of 18 percent. These figures mirror a global increase in lethal violence among all 50 countries on the 2021 World Watch List report.<sup>20</sup> Instances of deadly violence were particularly high in African and Latin-American regions, and were lowest in Asia. Overall, Christian men—particularly church leaders—are more likely to die for their faith than women. Not only are male killings recorded in more countries, but the number of deaths in each country is also considerably higher for men than women. More than half of the countries that reported deaths indicated that killings of men or boys were “moderately widespread”; women experienced usually

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that forced marriage grants a legal or religious covering to ongoing sexual violence. Aid to the Church in Need has noted that “first and foremost, these young women are victims of horrible and mortifying crimes for the rest of their lives, where the semblance of marriage is abandoned. Because they are also condemned to live as slaves in terror, and they are robbed of their most fundamental human rights and freedoms, we think we should switch to calling this “sexual enslavement through religious coercion”. These terms described more accurately the links in the criminal chain that will turn these women into living death, with the support of another community.” Szymanski, Marcela, Misleading use of the terms “forced marriage” and “forced conversion”, Research Note by Editor in Chief of “Religious Freedom in the World” by CAN International, February 2020.

<sup>16</sup> The scale used to capture the frequency at which a Pressure Point occurred included: isolated incident, several incidents, moderately widespread, and widespread (in order of fewest to most).

<sup>17</sup> All names in this report have been changed for security reasons.

<sup>18</sup> Open Doors’ Behind Closed Doors report details this phenomenon in India, and can be found [here](#).

<sup>19</sup> 75 percent of the countries that reported deaths were in a state of conflict (according to information from International Crisis Group, cross-checked with the Global Conflict Tracker)

<sup>20</sup> [World Watch List 2021: Compilation of all Main Documents, World Watch Research, January 2021, pp. 15.](#)

“isolated cases” or one of “several incidents.”

### Psychological violence

Psychological violence takes many different forms, and it is reported more frequently for Christian women and girls than for Christian men and boys. Reports of psychological violence increased by 85 percent for Christian women (from 20 countries reporting the use to 37) and to a lesser extent, by 18 percent for Christian men. This type of violence includes the intense pressure that Christians face to renounce their faith; threats for being outspoken about their faith; or the trauma that Christians experience after an assault.

Psychological violence mostly affects women and girls who often live in fear of attacks, or struggle to move on from the trauma of past physical and sexual assaults. The prevalence of this Pressure Point correlates to the top Pressure Points facing women: forced marriage, sexual violence and physical violence. Moreover, due to a lack of protective legal frameworks and social stigma, many women and girls also struggle to find and receive legal or therapeutic support after an assault.

Psychological violence is also highly effective against men and boys. In February 2020, a teenage boy in Bangladesh committed suicide, due to intense pressure from his Buddhist parents to return to their religion and the psychological trauma it caused. Reportedly, the parents constantly scolded their son and forced him to follow Buddhist beliefs and rituals. In Nigeria, men and boys have been forced to watch their wives, mothers and sisters be raped and killed in front of them. Often, males are left feeling helpless and frustrated because they are unable to protect the females in their family from violence. In many countries, men are less likely to receive therapeutic support than women because society expects them to be stronger. Analysts suspect that men and boys who experience sexual assault may be even less likely to report it than women due to the attached shame.



Pastor Ayuba's daughter was abducted in Chibok, Nigeria.

Practical concerns surrounding the COVID pandemic, such as food insecurity and restricted access to healthcare, have also added to the psychological burden on persecuted Christian men and women.

### Other Pressure Points of Concern

Other notable rises for women include targeted seduction and trafficking (see Spotlight: Trafficking and Affiliated Pressure Points). For men, forced conscription into the military or militias climbed 40 percent and most concerningly—killings increased by 26 percent.

## Spotlight on: Trafficking and Affiliated Pressure Points

To bring down the whole community, women can be targeted and used as pawns by persecutors. By abducting Christian women and forcing them to convert, persecutors jeopardize the future generation of the unwelcome Christian community. Forced marriage, for example, undermines both the development of Christian families and raising children as Christians. To weaken the core of the church community, persecutors often target daughters of pastors. Targeting women—the child bearers—in the unwanted community is a classic tactic that targets a whole community. It is a well-documented fact that rape can be used as a weapon of war.<sup>21</sup> Women's bodies essentially become the second battlefield. The “capture” of women in a community demonstrates to the men that they were unable to “protect” them. Persecutors are seen as “dominant.” In the midst of using these women as pawns, of course, real women are violently abused.

Trafficking as a form of religious persecution continues to pose a threat in all regions on the World Watch List and it is rising, particularly in Africa and Asia. Globally, 17 countries (up from 10 the previous year) reported incidents of trafficked women and girls. Countries engaged in conflict were most likely to report instances of sexual violence and trafficking.<sup>22</sup> The recurring geopolitical phenomenon to exploit minority communities in conflict situations is well-documented—whether it is forced recruitment of boys into militias or forced labor; or girls into forced marriages and sexual slavery.<sup>23</sup> In 2019, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) noted: “In situations characterized by violence, brutality and coercion, traffickers can operate with even greater impunity.”<sup>24</sup> Traffickers commonly target forced migrant populations, making Christian refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs) particularly vulnerable.<sup>25</sup> In Somalia and Somaliland for example, violence between clans and from Islamic extremist group al-Shabaab has forced many to flee. “The situation for people in general in IDP camps is very precarious there,” a country expert comments, “let alone when they are Christians—even more so for women and girls.”

For females, trafficking is typically not a stand-alone Pressure Point, but rather one affiliated with the other Pressure Points,

<sup>21</sup> UN Security Council 1820 (2008)

<sup>22</sup> 71 percent of countries that reported trafficking for women were in a state of conflict, including Cameroon, Central African Republic, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Libya, Myanmar, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan and Syria.

<sup>23</sup> [The Global Slavery Index 2018](#), Walk Free Foundation, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> [Remarks at the launch of the Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018](#), Yury Fedotov, January 7, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> [Framework Document, Developing standard operating procedures to facilitate the identification and protection of victims of trafficking](#), UNHCR and IOM, June 2020, p.6.

with each one relying on the value of a woman's sexuality. Over the last year, incidents of targeted seduction<sup>26</sup> of Christian women and girls living in the 50 countries on Open Doors' World Watch List more than tripled (from 8 percent to 26 percent) compared to the same kinds of incidents involving males. When targeted seduction is not successful, trafficking works in conjunction with abduction and rape. Traffickers often attempt to cloak the associated sexual violence behind a claim that the girl is now married, which in reality is often a forced marriage or a marriage resulting from targeted seduction. Countries where the persecution engine Islamic oppression has a very strong presence are more likely to report sexual violence and forced divorce than other countries with different persecution engines.<sup>27</sup> This difference again links to the sociocultural norms surrounding the value and purpose of women and girls in Islamic societies.

Of the 13 countries that reported incidents of targeted seduction, 11 of those countries are Muslim-majority nations. A country expert in Muslim-majority Malaysia explains: "Muslim men will use relationships to Islamize the non-Muslim women by marrying them and getting them to convert to Islam. Divorce ensues, leaving the converted Muslim with no avenue to convert back to her religion. It is by far the most effective way to convert non-Muslim women."

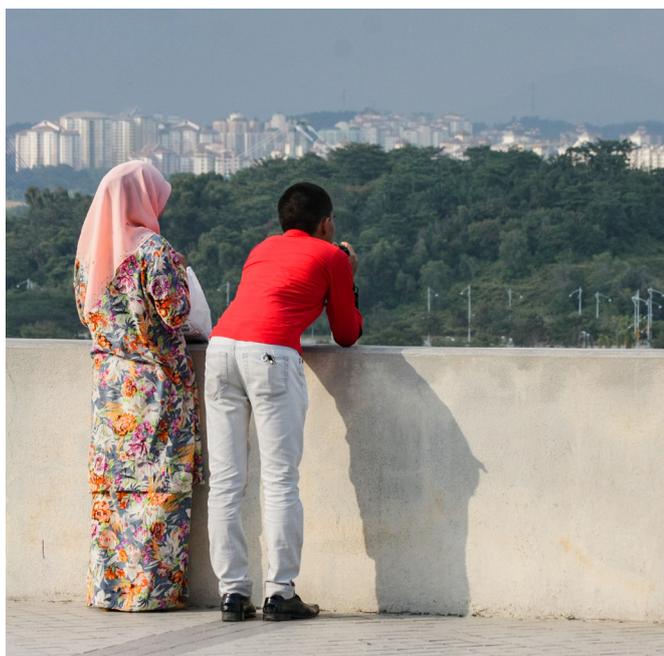


Image used for illustrative purposes

Given these dynamics, it is not surprising that countries reporting incidents of targeted seduction also report incidents of forced marriage.<sup>28</sup> The stark rise in incidents of targeted seduction suggests that Islamic extremist groups have become increasingly aware of this tactic's effectiveness to

fracture Christian communities and win converts to Islam. While the form and prevalence of trafficking vary considerably by global region, GSRP reporting consistently indicates that both trafficking and its affiliated Pressure Points effectively weaponize women's bodies to restrict the growth of the Christian population. By stripping the Christian community of its women and girls—and thereby future mothers—fewer children are born into the next generation. Even if a girl manages to escape her abusers and return home, her community may struggle to accept her due to the stigma attached to rape. She may be viewed as "tarnished" and no longer an appropriate marriage prospect.

Region	Average number of Pressure Points per country for women	% of countries reporting sexual violence	% of countries reporting forced marriage
MENA	11	100%	82%
Africa	10.6	84%	96%
Asia	8	72%	80%
Latin America	6.1	66%	33%

The main perpetrators using this weapon of trafficking include:

#### 1) Extremist groups in MENA and sub-Saharan Africa

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, as well as sub-Saharan Africa, Islamic extremist groups such as Boko Haram and Fulani militants abduct and force Christian women and girls into marriages and/or sexual slavery and in some cases to act as suicide bombers. The Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) observes that there is an "ideologically motivated grooming process aimed at the religious conversion of religious minority women."<sup>29</sup> For example, numerous reports document Islamic extremists luring a Christian Coptic girl into marriage—in an effort to further pressure the girl to convert to her new husband's religion.<sup>30</sup> In other words, Christian women and girls in these areas are targets of men/boys who use romance to deceive and convert them to Islam. In addition to exploiting a market for young women's bodies, trafficking in this region is part of a systematic process of Islamization. Kidnapping, sexually enslaving and forcibly converting Christian women and girls bring shame upon their Christian communities. Further, as already described, these tactics grow the Islamic population and stunt the growth of the church because any children born out of these situations are automatically registered as Muslim.

Women and girls who escape their captors often struggle to reintegrate into their home community because of stigma and shame. When Esther, a young Nigerian girl abducted by

<sup>26</sup> This Pressure Point also correlates highly with countries in a state of conflict. Of the 13 countries that reported Targeted Seduction, 10 were in a state of conflict; 24 of the top 50 World Watch countries are in a state of conflict, according to data from International Crisis Group and the Global Conflict Tracker. The 10 countries from this list that reported Targeted seduction include: Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Iraq, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria and Pakistan.

<sup>27</sup> Open Doors' analysis of Christian persecution recognizes that there are different engines of persecution, and that more than one of them may apply to a country. These engines include Islamic extremism, Religious nationalism, Clan oppression, Dictatorial paranoia, Ethno-religious hostility, Organized corruption and Crime and Other Christian denominations.

<sup>28</sup> 12 of the 13 countries that reported 'Targeted seduction' also reported 'Forced marriage.' Forced conversion is not a specific Pressure Point but was commonly cited.

<sup>29</sup> [Invisible Targets of Hatred: Socioeconomically Excluded Women from Religious Minority Backgrounds. Tadros, M. CREID. 2020. pp.33.](#)

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Boko Haram in an attack on their Christian village, escaped her captors, she returned home only to be shunned by her community. “They called my baby ‘Boko,’” she says. In their view, Esther and her baby were tarnished. A Nigerian country expert explains: “Many girls raped carry the scar and trauma for a very long time, their self-worth is damaged. Very little actually come out of that trauma. Communities don’t usually help—many stigmatize victims of rape.” This shame and stigma are often part of extremists’ wider strategy to spread Islam. Christian women and girls have also been targeted by

**“It is no coincidence that those most likely to be trafficked are especially susceptible to discrimination and intolerance, based on their race, ethnicity, religion or other distinguishing factors. Some groups, such as migrant women and girls, are vulnerable to intersectional and multiple discrimination.”**

—OCHCR report, 2014

traffickers who think of these women as inferior because of their religion. A country expert speaking about Mozambique comments: “The traffickers would be more likely to take women or children whom they feel have no value to them; that is, they would not sell their own kinsmen.”

Christian women belonging to certain ethnicities or tribes can be particularly vulnerable. Their bodies are a symbol of their community’s honor and can be attacked as such.

## 2) Human traffickers across Asia

In countries neighboring China, Christian women and girls are exploited in extensive human trafficking webs. China’s one-child policy has resulted in a strong preference toward male births, and an increase in gender-biased sex selection.<sup>31</sup> The resulting shortage of women has fuelled trafficking and opened an avenue for religious persecution. The U.S. State Department’s 2020 Trafficking in Persons report (Pakistan profile) notes that, “traffickers increasingly targeted impoverished Christian communities to send females to China for arranged marriages.”<sup>32</sup> According to a 2019 investigation by Associated Press News, 629 women and girls—including many Christians—were trafficked between 2018 and 2019 and forced to marry Chinese men. Many were isolated in rural locations, physically assaulted and sexually abused.<sup>33</sup> In Myanmar, reports indicate that Christian women in Christian-majority Kachin State continue to be trafficked to China to become “brides,” where they are raped with the aim of impregnating them to produce male heirs.<sup>34</sup> For many years, Kachin Christians have been exposed to these atrocities and even targeted within IDP camps where the Myanmar army inflicts further torturous acts.

Christian women and girls have also been trafficked within their local Asian communities by Muslim men who target, rape and force them to marry. One of the most publicized reports of this in 2020 chronicled the tragic story of Arzoo, a 13-year-old Pakistani girl who was abducted, forced to convert to Islam and was quickly married off to one of her captors, a 44-year-old Muslim man.<sup>35</sup> When the case went to court, the judge willingly believed the captor that she was not a minor, and that

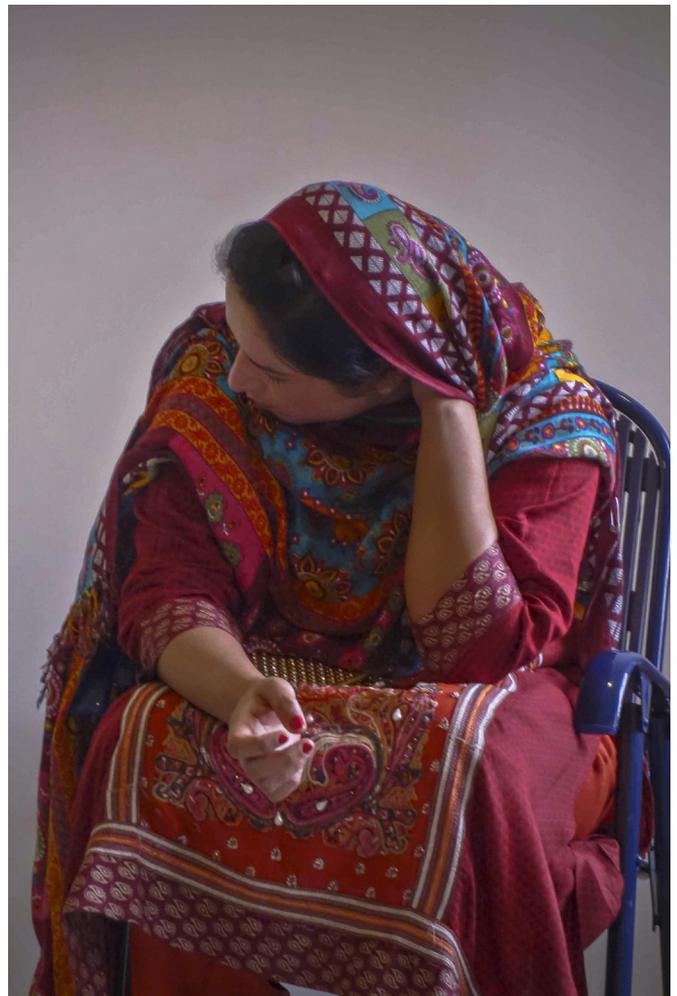


Image used for illustrative purposes

she voluntarily chose to become a Muslim. Only after a public outcry, the court ordered the kidnapper’s arrest.

## 3) Criminal gangs in Latin America

In countries like Colombia and Mexico and throughout Latin America, organized criminal groups create human trafficking routes. In areas controlled by drug cartels, women and girls were abducted and forced into sexual slavery and prostitution. A regional expert notes, “Criminal leaders pay special attention to the children of devoted [Christian] parents because their obedience is presumed, so it is easier to instruct [these children] to be part of the mafia and to sexually take advantage of them because [these groups] threaten to harm their families.” For these reasons, Christian women and girls in Latin America bring a better price when sold in trafficking networks.

**“Criminals are seeking to profit from the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has also heightened the vulnerability of migrants to risks of human trafficking and migrant smuggling.”**

– UN Secretary-General António Guterres

<sup>31</sup> Forbes, [What are We Doing About The Issue of Missing Women In 2021?](#)

<sup>32</sup> [Trafficking in Persons Report: 20th edition. Department of State, United States of America. June 2020. pp. 394.](#)

<sup>33</sup> [AP Exclusive: 629 Pakistani girls sold as brides to China. Gannon, K. December 7, 2019.](#)

<sup>34</sup> [The Guardian, Kachin women in Myanmar raped until they get pregnant, March 21, 2019.](#)

<sup>35</sup> See for example, [Justice for Arzoo campaign spreads across Pakistan. AsiaNews. October 29, 2020.](#)

## The impact of COVID-19

Across the globe, the crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing social, cultural, economic and other structural vulnerabilities for men and women alike. The rise in psychological violence (noted in Pressure Points of Particular Concern, page 6) may, in part, be linked to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has revealed the ugliness of religious persecution in new ways.

The data for this report ties the pandemic's impact to pre-existing gender-based vulnerabilities. For example, multiple countries reported a rise in domestic and sexual violence.<sup>36</sup> Research indicates that vulnerable converts are at greater risk when they're locked in confinement with their families who may abuse them for leaving the family's or community's religion to convert to Christianity, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.<sup>37</sup> The UN has labeled this rise in domestic violence a "shadow pandemic" and recognizes that gender vulnerability is amplified by forms of fragility, such as discrimination on the basis of faith.<sup>38</sup>

For Christian women and girls, the pandemic lockdowns have made their situation even more precarious. Abduction, forced conversion and forced marriage have all increased due to heightened economic and physical insecurity.<sup>39</sup> Experts from the Gulf region explain how lockdowns have reduced the number of people on the streets, making it easier to target Christian women and girls, and harder to recover them. In Mozambique, the economic impact of COVID-19 on already poor families and day laborers pushed underage girls into forced marriages to "guarantee food for the family."<sup>40</sup> In South Asia, the lockdown delayed for three months the recovery of Lucina, a 19-year-old Christian woman who was abducted, forcibly married, and repeatedly raped. Her father, a gifted evangelist, was the primary target of the perpetrators.<sup>41</sup>

The pandemic has also enabled criminal gangs to expand control, impacting Christian men in Latin-American countries, where incidents of forced recruitment have increased. In sub-Saharan Africa, extremist groups like Boko Haram and Fulani militants have exploited the chaos and authorities' focus on the pandemic, giving these groups more room to maneuver and intensify their attacks on Christian communities.<sup>42</sup> Men in church leadership roles are also particularly vulnerable.



<sup>36</sup> Including Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Malaysia, Mexico and Pakistan. Also recorded by the World Watch List 2021: World Watch List 2021: Compilation of all Main Documents, World Watch Research, January 2021.

<sup>37</sup> A portion of the Pressure Points were marked as 'isolated incidents' or 'several incidents,' indicating that not all Pressure Points are widely felt by men and women in each country. However, if these incidents were removed from the data, the overall number of Pressure Points would reduce by just 15 percent for each gender.

<sup>38</sup> The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against women during COVID-19. UN Women, 2020. [Accessed January 26, 2021]; Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women. United Nations, April 9, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> World Watch List 2021: Compilation of all Main Documents, World Watch Research, January 2021.

<sup>40</sup> COVID-19: Pandemic "pushing" Mozambican girls into premature marriage. Club of Mozambique, October 13, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> For more details on this story, it can be accessed in the GSRP 2021 Toolkit at Open Doors Analytical (Password: freedom)

<sup>42</sup> Increased terror attacks in Africa amid coronavirus pandemic. DW, April 9th, 2020.

## Spotlight on: GSRP in Latin America

In Latin America being young carries great risk. Being both young and male is particularly dangerous. In several countries, notorious groups such as MS-13 and Barrio 18—some of the most feared gangs in the world—exert widespread control through violence.<sup>43</sup> Allegiance to all forms of Christianity is seen as competition to gangs' control.

Globally, 7.3 Pressure Points were found for males in each country, compared to 9.5 for women. But in Latin America, where Catholicism is the majority religion, the balance shifts dramatically. Here, the average for men rises to 10.6 Pressure Points per country but falls to 6.1 for women. What's behind the shift? In these regions, organized gang violence is high, and criminal groups forcibly recruit adolescent boys into their ranks (girls are also recruited, but boys are far more likely to be targeted).<sup>44</sup> Inside these gangs, men and boys are physically, psychologically and verbally abused. To avoid gang recruitment, men and boys are often forced to flee their homes for safety.

Corruption and organized crime are the primary persecution engines in this region, which creates a greater breadth of pressures for young men. Women and girls in Latin America experience fewer Pressure Points because religious tolerance is higher among the general population than in other regions. As a result, families do not respond to women and girls' decisions about belief or non-belief with the same violence and pressure as is seen in other regions. However, Christian women and girls are far from safe. They risk abduction, sexual assault and forcible gang involvement.

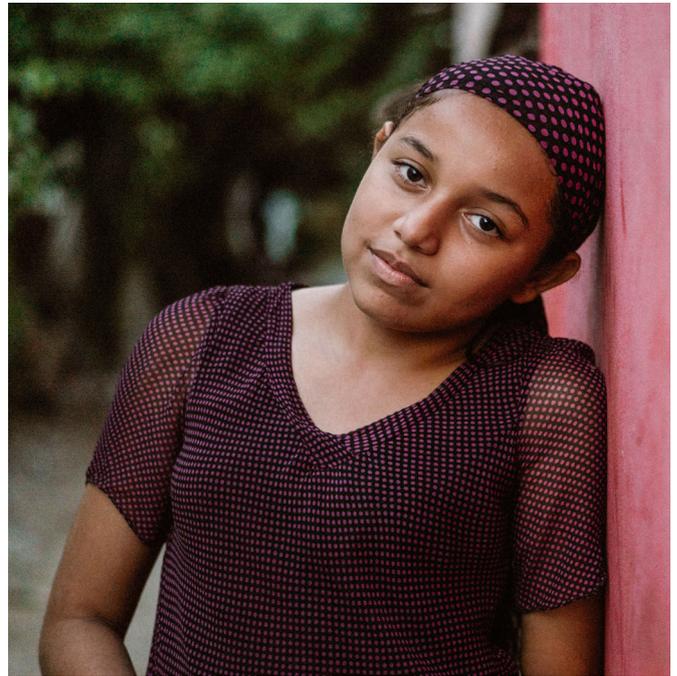
### **Gang violence: "An inescapable destiny" for adolescents**

In March 2020 during a church worship service, 20-year-old Antonio was shot and killed. His offense? Antonio refused to join a local gang. But Antonio's refusal is rare. Gang retaliation is almost guaranteed, so few youth resist. A country expert described forced recruitment as an "inescapable destiny." Young recruits are forced down a criminal path, primarily drug trafficking and extortion. According to International Crisis Group, 2020 saw a dramatic increase in the recruitment of children into armed groups, in part due to criminals exploiting the COVID-19 lockdown to increase and intensify their activity.<sup>45</sup>

Young women and girls, too, are commonly victims of sexual and gender-based violence by gang members. For example, in Colombia drug cartel leaders threaten to kill Christian families if they refuse to give up their daughters. Targeted for their perceived purity and obedience, Christian girls are often used for sexual purposes, sometimes formalized through civic formalities like 'marriage.' Violent acts like these are also a way of silencing the voice of vocal church leaders who are speaking out against criminal activities affecting life in their communities.

### **Unique challenges for ex-gang member converts**

Ex-gang members experience one of the most unique forms of persecution in Latin America. For example, gang members in El Salvador and Honduras who convert to evangelical



Daniela, Colombia.

Christianity are, in general, permitted to leave the gang on the grounds of their new beliefs.<sup>46</sup> However, they will live under constant surveillance both by the former gang and by rival gangs. Any sign that he is not actually a Christian can result in his death for leaving the gang under false pretenses. Converts also often have trouble reintegrating into society; many have visible tattoos and scars indicating their former allegiance, which quickly raises suspicion among authorities and the local community. They are, in a sense, "marked" for life. Hardships like these can cause some new converts struggling in their faith to return to the gang for protection. In other Latin American countries, conversion to Christianity while in a gang is a death sentence.

### **Church leaders and activists: a dangerous vocation.**

Across Latin America, leading a church is a dangerous choice, especially for church leaders who speak out against criminal activity and corruption in their area. Often, church leaders also lead the community. In Cuba, the authoritarian regime monitors pastors and in places like Colombia and Mexico, gang activity remains the greatest source of pressure for church leaders. While some gangs treat church leaders with respect, others view them as a threat, especially those who proactively work to keep youth out of gangs and publicly speak out against corruption. And because church leaders have access to church funds, they are also vulnerable to extortion and exorbitant fines. In the past year, many Latin-American pastors (usually men) were beaten, kidnapped for ransom and killed.

Daniela was 12 when her father, a pastor and community leader in their area of Colombia, was shot at home in broad daylight. Pastor Plinio was targeted because he was speaking out against gang violence and preaching the gospel. Like many church leaders who have lost their lives because they refused to remain silent, Plinio left behind a family, a church of new believers and a struggling community.

<sup>43</sup> Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18: Gangs, Terrorists, or Political Manipulation? Ruiz, P., Small Wars Journal, October 1, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Virus-Proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle, International Crisis Group, November 13, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Virus-proof violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle. International Crisis Group, November 13, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> For Some Gang Members in El Salvador, The Evangelical Church Offers a Way Out. NPR, July 2, 2018

# Implications and Conclusion

A complex problem requires a multi-faceted solution.

While the WWL 2021 GSRP report focuses on persecutors' GSRP tactics, it also offers avenues of reflection for local faith actors<sup>47</sup> and policy recommendations for government (p. 12) within the larger picture of how these tactics actually attack the family unit, marriage and other linked experiences. While it is vital for government and local faith actors to coordinate with each other, local faith actors are in a position of considerable influence in the area where they have the greatest agency. Although someone's choice to convert to Christianity may expose them to persecution, that faith can also be a resource for strength, comfort and forging a path forward as a response to the persecution and discrimination they might encounter as part of a minority religion.

## Attack on family as a deeply knit unit

This report highlights the often-visible Pressure Points of physical violence, economic hardship and government imprisonment that Christian men often suffer because of their faith. Consequently, the need is great for religious communities to address the suffering of Christian men—often the heads or patriarchs of the household—and the sense of shame and impotence they might feel when they are beaten, unemployed or imprisoned. By working with persecuted men, churches can help ensure Christian families survive even when religious persecution has deprived a male of what gives him societal value.

While these tactics may appear to be only male-related, the very notion of family as a balanced and communal unit is, by implication, also under attack. Coercive and abusive violence isolates men and even takes advantage of religious communities' efforts to prioritize men's education and employment. Unable to provide for their families and serve in their communities, persecuted men can struggle with a sense of failure, unintentionally driving a wedge between them and their family members—as if they were not meant to be a deeply knit unit who, together, finds solutions for family stability and healing.

## Attack on marriage as a place of safety

This report also has spotlighted trafficking, forced marriage and sexual violence as Pressure Points used against Christian women because of their faith. These often-hidden religious persecution tactics reveal a great need for religious communities to protect and support women and girls—and have the courage to denounce the risks and abuse they face.

While these tactics may appear to be only about women and girls, the institution of marriage and human sexuality are, by implication, under attack. Too often, the coercive and abusive violence that females face is carried out in the name of marriage, either in a marriage she or her family willingly chose or in forced situations. Persecutors are deliberately taking advantage of what the religious community views as a holy institution and an intimate relational act by twisting these sacred beliefs into a legal and moral trap that can leave a woman fearing for her life and the lives of her children.

## Different attacks, but a linked experience

In each scenario, GSRP harms both the individual and the collective. If a man loses his job or is sent to prison under false charges, his family will be economically vulnerable and bereft of a husband or father figure. A woman who is raped suffers trauma both physically and psychologically. Beyond her pain, her husband feels shamed and angry he was unable to protect her. If a church leader is killed, arrested or fined, their death sends shock waves—intentional warning signs—down the spine of the collective congregation. Persecutors are often strategic, intentionally weaponizing many Pressure Points to inflict harm on the Christian family and community beyond the immediate victim. For example, in Burkina Faso, Muslim religious leaders actively encourage Ouagadougou Muslim youths to marry daughters of Christian leaders and church members because this is one of the most permanent and generational conversion tactics available.

GSRP targets what society believes to be a man or woman's worth, means of belonging, and/or means of physical security. If the religious community believes the incident against a man or woman has successfully damaged the value or status of that individual, then the community and future generations—as a whole—are far more likely to be damaged by division, dysfunction and a sense of unshakeable shame.

## Resilience through a linked response by local faith actors

GSRP research provides insight into persecution's impact on both the individual and the collective body. The GSRP analytical team suggests that local faith actors can become even more intentional about developing faith-based responses to address both the individual and the collective toll on family, church and community.

By reinforcing faith narratives that help a man or woman see their true, unchanging worth, local faith actors can encourage a positive and collective response of solidarity to gender-based attacks in a minority religious community, rejecting harmful responses that are meant to shame or divide. Instead of reinforcing societal expectations of men's and women's roles with faith narratives, local faith actors can build community resilience through the use of counter-cultural faith messages of identity and belonging. Regardless of whether or not they are converts from a different ethnic background, singles who were denied a Christian spouse, or individuals traumatized by their experiences, local faith actors' compassionate and effective response to an attack on an individual's worth, means of belonging and physical security is crucial. Faith communities can discover additional solidarity by prioritizing their faith narratives of safe, faith-based marriages, as well as equitable and mutually supporting families.

In fact, subsequent years of GSRP research indicate that a substantial, multi-faceted community response to GSRP could be truly instrumental in significantly reducing or even eliminating gender-based persecution as a tactic.

<sup>47</sup> Local faith actors include religious leaders, institutions, communities and faith-inspired organizations with a religious purpose operating at a national or sub-national level in a country.

# Recommendations:

To address the gender-specific nature of persecution and discrimination, Open Doors recommends:

## 1. Donor governments and institutions should:

- Ensure a gender perspective is integrated into programs designed for protecting and promoting FoRB, and that sensitivity for issues of FoRB is integrated into gender-related anti-discrimination programs (as recommended by the Special Rapporteur on FoRB);<sup>48</sup>
- Include religion as a factor of vulnerability in any assessment made in planning and programming;
- Include targeted programming and aid for women who face double vulnerabilities as members of minority faiths, recognizing the important role of such programming in countering violent extremism.

## 2. Given the prevalence of sexual violence, forced marriage and human trafficking against women from religious minorities, governments should:

- Ensure women have equality before the law so that perpetrators of sexual violence, forced marriage and human trafficking are not treated with impunity;
- In line with joint general recommendation no. 31 of CEDAW/general comment no. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC)<sup>49</sup>, repeal all legislation that condones, allows, or leads to harmful practices,<sup>50</sup> including traditional, customary, or religious laws, and any legislation that accepts the defense of honor as a defense or mitigating factor in the commission of crimes in the name of so-called honor;
- Enact legislation to counter child, early, and forced marriage, and ensure such laws are enforced;
- Ratify and abide by the terms of the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime.

## 3. Given the way sexual violence in conflict is being used against women from religious minorities, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict<sup>51</sup> should carry out a study, with input from the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), to enhance understanding of the double vulnerability faced by women and girls from religious

minorities and to propose how the protection of women, who are doubly vulnerable due to their adherence to a minority faith, can be enhanced.

## 4. Given the synergies between FoRB and women's rights, the CEDAW Committee should issue a general recommendation that:

- Recognizes that women's rights and religious freedom are mutually reinforcing, not contradictory;
- Recognizes the existence of a double vulnerability faced by women and girls from religious minorities;
- Identifies the synergies between FoRB and women's rights to equality, drawing on the groundwork the Special Rapporteur on FoRB in addressing this theme;
- Encourages state parties to consider this interrelatedness;
- Proposes measures to address the double vulnerability of women and girls from religious minorities, such as encouraging mechanisms for cooperation between institutions and actors working for women's rights and FoRB; and encouraging governments to enact and enforce the legislation highlighted in recommendation 2 above.

## 5. The Global Church should:

- Openly acknowledge the extent and severity of violence against Christian women, especially in communities under pressure for their faith;
- Pray for women who are doubly vulnerable due to their gender and faith;
- Advocate on behalf of women facing this double vulnerability;
- Seek justice for women facing any form of discrimination, persecution or violence, by:
- Propagating a biblical understanding of God's heart for justice, and the dignity of all humans;
- Empowering women and men to access justice, in order to hold perpetrators to account.

<sup>48</sup> A/68/290, Report of the Special Rapporteur Heiner Bielefeldt on freedom of religion or belief, 2013, Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance, para. 73.

<sup>49</sup> <https://undocs.org/CEDAW/C/GC/31/CRC/C/GC/18>

<sup>50</sup> Harmful practices in the include sexual violence and forced marriage.

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/>