Open Doors

CHILDREN AND YOUTH SPECIFIC RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION 2021

Preliminary findings from 50 countries

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Key findings

Globally, religious persecution and discrimination target children and youth by manipulating their short- and long-term options through taking control of the gateways and pathways to their adult identities and situations. Through denying access to Christian parents, teachings and materials, gateways for accessing religious education are closed off. Through education, pathways for their future are restricted and diverted; pathways to work, family and religion or belief.

Below are 7 specific findings from the WWL 2021 children and youth specific religious persecution (CSRP-YSRP) report:

1. **Children and youth are targeted in order to prevent the next generation from building up the church.** Christian communities run the risk of being deprived of the current young generation, as well as future founders of families or leaders in the Christian faith. Children and youth are targeted because they have the potential to revive and perpetuate the Church.

2. **Children of church leaders and converts in at least 28 countries are targeted by perpetrators of violations,** as some of the church's most vulnerable and disempowered members. This is a form of punishment aimed at their parents.

3. **CSRP-YSRP aims to shape young people's emotional, psychological and religious identities.** At a point in their lives when identities are malleable and in the process of being formed, CSRP-YSRP limits and skews the choices available to children and youth. Young hearts and minds are trained to self-restrict regarding the opportunities and rights they pursue and internalize the dominant religious or ideological identity.

4. **The top three Pressure Points work in tandem: Discrimination/harassment via education, Denied access to Christian materials, teachings and rites and Denied access to a Christian parents. Together, they prevent the next generation from learning about Christian faith at a formative time in children's lives.** These Pressure Points are enabled by structures that are deeply rooted in state institutions and society.

5. **Children and youth are treated as commodities.** Christian young people are treated as products that can be assimilated into or forced to serve another belief group, rather than considered as individuals who are integral members of their communities and have inherent value and individual human rights.

6. **Broadly, both lawless actions and legislation are utilized to varying degrees in different contexts as a means of religious discrimination and/or persecution. Christian children and youth are particularly vulnerable in conflict affected areas.** In sub-Saharan Africa, extra-legal violence is a common tool for oppression, whereas in the Middle East and North Africa, state legislation is more frequently used to deny access to legal identity as Christians and to Christian religious education.

7. **CSRP-YSRP is inextricably tied to gender-specific religious persecution dynamics.** As boys and girls move towards adolescence, the religious persecution they experience is increasingly determined by their gender. Boys in some African and Latin American countries commonly face the threat of forced recruitment into militias, whereas globally girls experience high rates of sexual violence and child/forced marriages.

Introduction

Every day, the human right to Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is violated for millions of people across the globe. These violations are not uniform in experience, but vary according to the contexts of different countries, according to gender, and according to age.

Religious persecution[1] of and discrimination against children and youth violates multiple established rights: FoRB and the right of children to hold their own religion or belief.[2] The specific forms of persecution and discrimination that young people encounter also violate other rights specific to children, such as the right to study the religion of a parent or the right to a legal identity.[3]

Preliminary research into the experiences of children and youth indicates that the forms of religious persecution they face are **isolating, identity-shaping and harsh.** Open Doors' World Watch Research department refers to this new area of study as children and youth-specific religious persecution (CSRP-YSRP).

CSRP-YSRP draws upon 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.[4] In-depth analysis of this data points to persecution targeting young people's identities, their _gateways_ to access a religious education, and their _pathways_ into future jobs and family roles. Education is a key opportunity for persecution.

This research studies the experiences of Christian children and youth; however, the authors presume that these tactics are not unique to Christian populations. There is a need for far greater understanding of how children and youth around the world are vulnerable to violence, discrimination and harassment because of their religion or belief, or their association with belief communities.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was applied, using a parallel methodology as for Open Doors' gender-specific religious persecution (GSRP) research.[5] During the reporting period (1 October 2019, to 30 September 2020), Open Doors World Watch Research monitored religious persecution dynamics in more than 100 countries. The authors studied data from the top 50 countries where persecution is very high or extreme.

Data is gathered 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 local persecution experts.[6]

For purposes of this study, "children and youth" should be understood to refer to individuals under the age of 18. While Open Doors recognizes that understandings of who is classed as "children and youth" varies according to context, the need for research consistency led to using the classification of under-18s, as used by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The specific experiences of children and youth may also vary according to their particular backgrounds, such as being born into a Christian family or a family of another belief. Another distinction can be made between the experiences of pre-adolescents and adolescents. However, the preliminary nature of this research means that background and age distinctions are not systematically delineated enough in the data to draw fully substantive conclusions.

This research relies on data provided by adults describing persecution of children and youth; no primary data was gathered from under-18s. This is a research limitation and an area of possible future improvement. However, this needs to be done with caution, recognizing the unique vulnerabilities and challenges of conducting research with children and youth.[7] The findings are also limited by the subjective nature of qualitative research and by the setup of data collection that focuses primarily on the experiences of Christian adults. While the subjectivity cannot be addressed without losing valuable descriptive contributions, in future research there can be a greater inclusion of children and youth through adapting questions to more fully capture their unique experiences.

Children and youth-specific data was coded through a CSRP-YSRP Pressure Points framework,[8] which was adapted from the GSRP framework to reflect the children and youth lens of persecution and discrimination. This included the creation of a CSRP-YSRP Pressure Point list. 'Pressure Point' is the term used to refer to both the pressures and violence faced in the course of religious persecution. This analysis revealed the frequency with which Pressure Points were experienced, enabling an understanding of emerging overall trends as well as retaining contextual descriptions.

A more detailed version of the methodology with an outline of the CSRP-YSRP Pressure Points framework with definitions can be found at Open Doors Analytical.[9]

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[1] The definition of persecution used in WWL analysis is: "Any hostility experienced as a result of one's identification with Christ. This can include hostile attitudes, words and actions towards Christians". This broad definition includes (but is not limited to) restrictions, pressure, discrimination, opposition, disinformation, injustice, intimidation, mistreatment, marginalization, oppression, intolerance, infringement, violation, ostracism, hostilities, harassment, abuse, violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide. WW Methodology: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/WWL-2021-Compilation-of-main-documents-ODA-version.pdf>

[2] Article 18, UDHR (Universal Declaration of Human Rights). <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/udhr.pdf> ; Article 14, CRC (Convention on the Rights of the Child). <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf>

[3] Articles 30 & 8 respectively of the CRC. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf>

[4] Complete World Watch List findings (since WWL 2013) can be viewed at <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/world-watch-list-documentation/> and <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/country-dossiers/> [password: freedom]

[5] For the longer GSRP methodology, as well as all publications on gender-specific religious persecution, see Open Doors Analytical <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/gender-specific-persecution/> [password: freedom]

[6] Complete WWL Methodology, <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Complete-WWL-Methodology-October-2020-FINAL.pdf>, p.106. [password: freedom]

[7] See for example, 'Ethical Research Involving Children', UNICEF, 2013. <https://childethics.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/ERIC-compendium-approved-digital-web.pdf>

[8] Children and youth 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.

[9] For the longer methodology, see Open Doors Analytical <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CSRP-YSRP-Methodology-August-2021.pdf> [password: freedom]

Children and Youth Specific Pressure Points

In places hostile to Christianity, children and youth face high levels of persecution or discrimination because of their faith or their association with faith communities. Christian children and youth encounter an average of 9.4 different Pressure Points per country. This is comparable with the number of gender-specific Pressure Points used against Christian women, who are already acknowledged as being particularly vulnerable for their faith.[10] These initial findings are framed within a year in which all top 50 countries scored in 'very high' or 'extreme' persecution categories, as outlined in WWL methodology.[11] Research for the World Watch List (WWL) reveals that more than 340 million Christians worldwide experience high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith.

A young boy and girl in Afghanistan.

2021 Pressure Points
The top WWL 2021 Pressure Points facing children and youth are listed in Table 1.[12]

TABLE 1		
Rank	Percentage of 50 countries	Pressure points
1	98%	Discrimination/harassment via education
2	94%	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings & rites
3	84%	Denied access to a Christian parent
4	82%	Violence – verbal (including harassment and insults)
5	66%	Forced marriage
6 (tied)	58%	Violence – sexual
6 (tied)	58%	Violence – physical (including torture)
6 (tied)	58%	Denied legal identity as a Christian
9	50%	Violence – psychological
10	46%	Abduction

Educational settings and the opportunity to deny or restrict education is the most common form of discrimination facing Christian youth and children. This Pressure Point is highlighted below in Spotlight on Education. (See page 8)

When analyzing the top 10 Pressure Points for 2021, three words synthesize the characteristic challenges facing children and youth: They are isolating, identity-shaping and harsh.

Religious persecution of children and youth is characteristically:

– **Isolating**
– **Identity-shaping**
– **Harsh**

Isolating:
Isolation Pressure Points include; Abduction, Denied access to a Christian parent; Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings & rites; Denied access to social community/networks; Discrimination/harassment via Education; and Violence – sexual.

Children and youth are targeted through pressure which isolates them from their families and Christian communities. This can occur directly through abducting young people, occurring in 46% of countries in the WWL 2021 top 50. Yet there are other ways to enact isolation, such as denying access to a Christian parent or to Christian teachings, materials and rites, which often means limited or no contact with a church.

Such isolation serves to separate children and youth from sources of Christian religious education, but can also cause broader harm. Separation of children from parents has a devastating impact on both the short- and long-term physical and mental health of the young.[13] Such isolation and separation can deprive children and youth of the essential care and emotional support which is vital to their wellbeing.

Isolation can also occur through the shaming or shunning of children and youth. This primarily takes place through the denied access to social community/networks, which occurs in 44% of top 50 countries. Shunning can also occur at school through bullying and being set apart socially. Such ostracization may transpire purely because of the young person's Christian faith or because of their association with the Christian community. However, it can also be linked with Pressure Points that trigger further stigma, particularly within contexts with prevalent honor-shame systems. So, for example, the isolation of children and youth may also be linked with religiously targeted sexual violence which has the potential to shame young victims into isolation from their communities and/or families.

[10] Women average 10 GSRP Pressure Points per Top 50 country in 2021, <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/GSRP-Report-%E2%80%93-Same-Faith-Different-Persecution-%E2%80%93-March-2021.pdf> [password: freedom]
[11] Complete WWL Methodology, <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Complete-WWL-Methodology-October-2020-FINAL.pdf>, p.55-56. [password: freedom]
[12] Data was gathered within the reporting period, 1 October 2019, to 30 September 2020, and labelled as 2021 results in accordance with practice used for the 2021 World Watch List and 2021 GSRP report.
[13] 'Trauma Caused by Separation of Children from Parents', American Bar Association, 2018. <https://www.americanbar.org/groups/litigation/committees/childrens-rights/trauma-caused-by-separation-of-children-from-parents/>

Identity shaping:
Identity-shaping Pressure Points include: Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings & rites; Denied legal identity as a Christian; and Discrimination/ harassment via education.

CSRP-YSRP mainly occurs where children and youth's identities are shaped. This most clearly happens through denying Christian legal identities which violates the right of the child to a legal identity.[14] It also has a longer-term effect on the young person's life, shaping their educational, community and employment opportunities and experiences. Such shaping of children and youth's opportunities and futures can be understood as a means of controlling the gateways and pathways present in their lives (see page 13: Implications and Conclusion).

Children and youth's identities are also shaped in more indirect, but no less powerful, ways. Their experiences in education (see page 8: Spotlight: Education) and denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites are influential. Particularly, these aim to shape young people's religious or ideological identities, often by making the choice of adhering to Christian faith undesirable, traumatic and misunderstood.

This can result in children and youth self-restricting, avoiding exploring avenues of faith because of the consequences facing them if they do. In environments of extreme persecution, the specific targeting of education, churches and Christian materials can make living as a Christian appear unbearably painful for the young.

Matti[15] was born into a Christian family in Iraq. His parents divorced when he and his brother were still young, and his mother remarried a Muslim. According to the law Matti and his brother are now automatically Muslims because one parent converted. He was then abandoned by both his mother and father (who had also remarried). Matti lived with his aunt until age 25 when he wanted to get married to a Christian woman, but his efforts were rejected by the girl's family as officially he is a Muslim, meaning that by law their children would also be classified as such. This happened not once, but twice. Now aged 45, Matti is very sad that he is not able to raise his own family and pass on the Christian faith which is so important to him.

Harsh:
Harsh Pressure Points include: Forced marriage; Violence – death; Violence – physical; Violence – psychological; Violence – sexual; and Violence – verbal.

According to a recent UN report, half of all children globally, over one billion, experience violence every year: online, offline, in communities, schools, homes.[16] Violence-related Pressure Points, where violence is religiously motivated , comprise four of the top ten Pressure Points (in order of prevalence: verbal violence, sexual and physical violence, and psychological violence). In addition, shockingly, almost a third (32%) of countries record children and youth who have been killed because of their faith or for belonging to a Christian community or family.

The systemic mocking and marginalization of Christian children and youth through verbal violence is damaging to young people's identities. They may be pressured to conform to a majority religion, or to prioritize loyalty to the state. These verbal and psychological forms of pressure take place in every area of life, and, increasingly, online. The digital world opens up a wealth of opportunity for young people, yet they also risk online exploitation and abuse.[17] Often this is concealed from view and raises questions for future research about the complex digital challenges facing Christian children and youth.

Sexual violence can also be hidden from view: within homes, within honor-shame cultures, within legal systems, and within data collection itself.[18] There are significant threats outside of the home, from peers, militias, radical groups, and through sex

[14] Article 8, CRC. <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf>

[15] All names in this report have been changed for security reasons.

[16] 'Hidden scars: How violence harms the mental health of children', Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, United Nations, 2020. <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/documents/publications/final_hidden_scars_lhow_violence_harms_the_mental_health_of_children.pdf>

[17] 'Summary Paper On Online Child Sexual Exploitation', ECPAT International, 2020. <https://www.ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ECPAT-Summary-paper-on-Online-Child-Sexual-Exploitation-2020.pdf> ; 'Hidden scars: How violence harms the mental health of children', Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children, United Nations, 2020. <https://violenceagainstchildren.un.org/sites/violenceagainstchildren.un.org/files/documents/publications/final_hidden_scars_lhow_violence_harms_the_mental_health_of_children.pdf>

[18] 2020 GSRP, Open Doors International. <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GLOBAL-Gender-specific-religious-persecution-report-2020.pdf> [password: freedom]; 'The World's Shame: The Global Rape Epidemic. How Laws Around the World are Failing to Protect Women and Girls from Sexual Violence.' Equality Now, 2017. <https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/equalitynow/pages/308/attachments/original/1527599090/EqualityNowRapeLawReport2017_Single_Pages_0.pdf?1527599090>

trafficking. But for girls especially, the home holds most risk, particularly within forced marriages which can be concealed from reporting.[19] A country expert from Nigeria warns: "The challenge is that families don't speak out about rape. Some cases remain hidden." While Christian girls remain the most vulnerable to sexual violence, concerns have also been raised about the abduction and rape of Christian boys in Afghanistan and Pakistan.[20]

It is deeply unsettling to think of the children of the church being attacked and killed. Unfortunately, this is the reality in many countries where Christians are persecuted, with persecuting actors ranging from family members to peers to violent groups. Generally, this is motivated by those of majority religions or ideologies aiming to pressurize conversion, either to put pressure on relations, or using violence as a response to the rejection of the majority religion or belief. Yet sometimes there are specific triggers for violence, as in parts of Syria and Egypt, where witnesses reported that perceived immorality in the way Christian girls dress results in physical abuse. More commonly, the trigger is the refusal to renounce their faith or participate in the activities of violent groups.

Christian boys of Muslim background in Bangladesh.

[19] Most commonly for girls, sexual and gender-based violence is from an intimate partner, see 'Area of Global Distinctiveness: Protection from Violence', Plan International, 2019. <https://plan-international.org/publications/overview-protection-violence#download-options>

[20] This could be linked with customary practices of 'bacha bazi' in the two countries, where young boys are kept for sexual services by wealthy men, as well as the broader risk of forced sexual exploitation of boys, see 'Trafficking in Persons Report June 2019', Department of State, 2019. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019-Trafficking-in-Persons-Report.pdf>

Regional Analysis

Regional socio-cultural context provides different opportunities for the persecution of children and youth. The highest scoring Pressure Point, Discrimination/harassment via education, is addressed below in Spotlight: Education (see page 8). The regional analysis focuses on the differentiation between regions and the specific challenges faced according to context.

Top 10 Pressure Points regional breakdown is listed in Chart 1.

CHART 1: TOP PRESSURE POINTS FOR THREE REGIONS

Legend: Middle East & North Africa | Asia | Sub-Saharan Africa
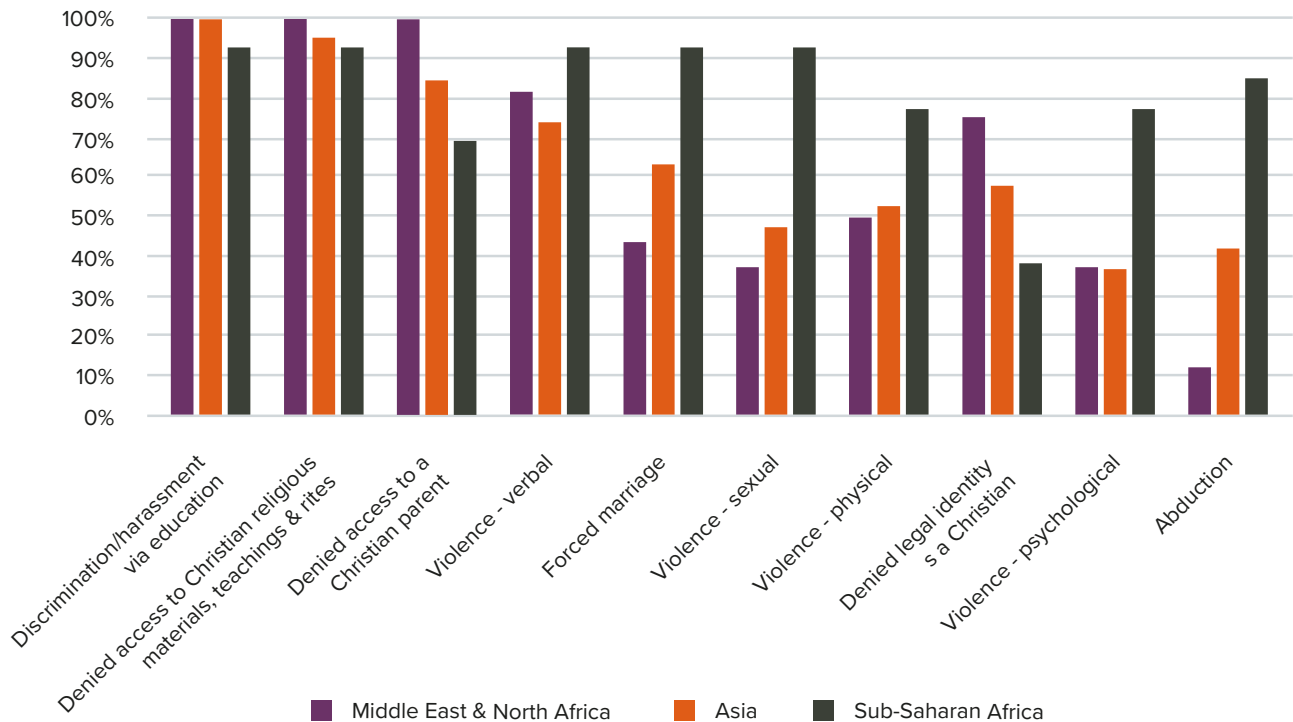
Girls reading the Bible in Laos.

Asia

Asia records median percentages for the top Pressure Points as seen in Chart 1. Yet distinctively, the political dominance of majority religions creates opportunities to target young people. For example, Christian children are denied accurate religious legal identities due to automatic registering of newborns as the majority or presumed religion. Christian parents may not legally have the option to register children as Christian, with children experiencing consequences of misassigned legal identities throughout their lives. This is not specific to one religion; an expert in Myanmar comments "Christians are automatically depicted as Buddhist in Bamah dominated regions. All Muslim background believers (MBBs) are registered as Muslims, so the children also are automatically registered as Muslim." Whereas in India, children of Christian parents are frequently registered as Hindu, especially if given non-anglicized names. In Malaysia, there have been several court cases where parents have divorced, with the parent who converted to Islam being granted custody and the children thus being registered as Muslim.

Middle East & North Africa

Structural discrimination in state institutions, laws and social norms favors Islamic populations. This creates increased opportunities to separate children from Christian parents. Often in contexts of forced divorces or separations due to

A class of students in Sudan.

a parent's Christian conversion, courts may automatically take away custody of children based solely on a parent's faith. Alternatively, extended families remove children from Christian parents, a practice accepted by communities due to embedded social norms. tates can exert further power over Christian parents: similar to the administration challenges churches face in the region, Christian parents with an Islamic background can often struggle to register children.[21] Chart 1 shows this in the high percentages for Denied access to a Christian parent and Denied legal identity as a Christian.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Compared globally, CSRP-YSRP in sub-Saharan Africa appears to occur at higher rates, averaging 11.8 Pressure Points per country.[22] Forms of violence (sexual, physical, psychological) particularly occur at higher than global averages, alongside forced marriage and abduction as seen in Chart 1. Violent insurgent groups exploit opportunities provided by the lack of protection for communities, with state and foreign military forces often overstretched and thus less able to intervene. With many countries shifting resources to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, extremist groups can further exploit gaps provided by the withdrawal of peacekeeping and counterterrorism forces.[23]

Latin America

There are just two countries from Latin America in the Top 50 country analysis, therefore, few conclusions can be drawn about the region solely from this data. The 2021 GSRP report, which analyzes data from the top 74 countries, including six from Latin America, provides a more useful insight, particularly into the experiences of male youth. Criminal groups in the region often forcibly recruit adolescent boys who then face physical, psychological and verbal violence in these hostile environments. To avoid this recruitment, boys may be forced to flee their homes for safety.[24]

Spotlight: Education

Two sisters in Laos, 12 and 14 years old, were bullied by their classmates because they were Christian themselves as well as daughters of someone who had been imprisoned. They were called the daughters of Yesu (Jesus). What should have been an honorable label instead carried the certainty of painful rejection. They have decided to stop their studies because they could no longer bear the exclusion and verbal abuse from their fellow students.

Discrimination and bias through education are powerful tools of persecution.[25] Globally, in all but one of the WWL 2021 Top 50 countries (98%), Christian children and youth face discrimination and harassment in educational settings.[26] Young people are singled out as different, mirroring wider societal patterns of marginalization. Bias appears in explicitly anti-Christian teaching, isolating children and youth associated with the faith. Those in authority within education systems can use their influence to make the Christian label undesirable. This includes teachers, school leaders, and those who determine curricula. For example, in Turkey, nationalist teachings of History portraying Christians as a threat to the country and false information and negative statements about Christianity are part of an educational system biased against minorities.[27]

In some contexts, beliefs with ties to national and/or ethnic identities are idealized and may be given greater weight in education. A variety of factors influence whether a minority belief, such as Christianity, is conflated with tribal, historical or political identity. For example, Western Christianity's complex colonial associations can negatively influence how Christianity is viewed within a national context; similarly, in Sudan and Somalia, Christianity is often viewed as a Western threat to Islam.

Children and youth can also be put under pressure to perform prayers and/or ceremonies contradicting their Christian faith,

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[21] Comparison made by regional youth expert.
[22] The global average being 9.4.
[23] 'Extremist Groups Stepping up Operations During COVID-19 Outbreak in sub-Saharan Africa', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/extremist-groups-stepping-operations-during-covid-19-outbreak-sub-saharan-africa>
[24] See more in 2021 GSRP, . <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/GSRP-Report-%E2%80%93-Same-Faith-Different-Persecution-%E2%80%93-March-2021.pdf> [password: freedom]
[25] 'Faith and a Future: Discrimination on the Basis of Religion or Belief in Education', CSW, 2018. <https://faithandafuture.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Faith_and_a_Future_HR.pdf>
[26] Mozambique is the singular country not recording the Pressure Point 'Discrimination/harassment via education.'
[27] From 2021 data and 'Discrimination based on Colour, Ethnic Origin, Language, Religion and Belief in Turkey's Education System', Kaya, N., Tarih Vakfi & Minority Rights Group International, 2015. <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/EN-turkiye-egitim-sisteminde-ayirimcilik-24-10-2015.pdf>

facing expulsion or violence if they do not comply. The impact of educational discrimination is felt in the present as well as restricting children and youth's future potential. This can be through deliberately marking down Christians or denying access to funding or earned scholarships. In extreme cases, education itself is denied. Being out of school hugely impacts young people and their future. Education is crucially important for reducing poverty and opening up job opportunities.[28] What is more, out-of-school children are more likely to be further exploited, attacked and discriminated against, and to have to take on dangerous work or marry early.[29]

Christian children and youth are denied access to education in multiple ways; not all are dismissed from school formally. Instead, harassment may be so severe they are effectively forced out. Broader religious persecution may also have this result; for example, if a parent loses their job because of their faith, school may become unaffordable, and their child may have to work instead. Severe levels of violence can also cut off access to education.

Opportunity for other forms of persecution
Persecution at school does not just occur through educational means. School is a gateway for multiple forms of persecution, in an environment where individuals can easily be singled out.

There are seven Pressure Points facing children and youth which are associated with an educational environment in the WWL 2021 top 50 countries. All of these associated Pressure Points can be carried out by those in authority, but two formally rely on authority figures to actualize: Enforced religious dress codes and Denied legal identity as a Christian (leading to enforced participation in majority belief teachings and ceremonies). Such activities control and commodify children and youth through the way they dress and act in school. Education and associated Pressure Points are listed in Table 2.

Class with Syrian children.

TABLE 2		
Rank	Percentage of 50 countries	Pressure points
1	98%	Discrimination/harassment via education
4	82%	Violence – verbal (including harassment and insults)
6 (tied)	58%	Violence – sexual
6 (tied)	58%	Violence – physical (including torture)
6 (tied)	58%	Denied legal identity as a Christian
9	50%	Violence – psychological
11	44%	Denied access to social community/networks
13	24%	Enforced religious dress code

Four of the associated Pressure Points comprise different forms of violence (verbal, sexual, physical, and psychological) in addition to the discrimination inherent in Denied access to social community/ networks (children and youth shunned by classmates). Education has the power and potential to create cultures of tolerance and understanding, but equally, can "fuel stereotyping, animosity" and "entrench disadvantage".[30] Carried out primarily by peers and teachers, an enabling environment often ignores, or worse, actively encourages such activities. Harassment of Christians may be seen as legitimate or even unremarkable, and so, these Pressure Points can be carried out with relative impunity.

In sub-Saharan Africa, it is insurgency groups, rather than people within the school system, who threaten with violence. The acute risk of kidnapping, attack and rape can result in schools being closed or in parents withdrawing their children because of the danger. Insurgents may see schoolchildren as "soft targets" who are unlikely to be able to put up much opposition, but who are more than likely to grab media attention.[31]

[28] 'Addressing the learning crisis: An urgent need to better finance education for the poorest children', UNICEF, 2020. <https://www.unicef.org/media/63896/file/Addressing-the-learning-crisis-advocacy-brief-2020.pdf>
[29] 'Out-of-school children' defined as not enrolled in primary or secondary education, includes those in non-formal education, retrieved from 'Fixing the Broken Promise of Education for all: Findings from the Global Initiative on Out-of-school Children', UNESCO Institute for Statistics & UNICEF, 2015. <http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/fixing-broken-promise-efa-findings-global-initiative-oosc-education-2015-en.pdf>
[30] 'Faith and a Future: Discrimination on the Basis of Religion or Belief in Education', CSW, p.4, 2018. <https://faithandafuture.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Faith_and_a_Future_HR.pdf>
[31] Describing insurgency tactics in northern Nigeria and the surrounding regions. 'Nigeria school abductions: Why are schoolchildren being kidnapped?' BBC, 03:55. 2021. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-africa-56451260>

Gender and CSRP-YSRP

Initial findings on CSRP-YSRP confirm patterns identified in research of Open Doors' World Watch Research on Gender-Specific Religious Persecution (GSRP).[32] The Pressure Points below for boys and girls reflect a targeting of the intersecting vulnerabilities of being: a) a Christian, b) a boy or girl, and c) young.

Preliminary research suggests gender-differentiation of targeting begins in youth. Although only 38% of data on children and youth could be separated by gender, emerging trends indicate parallels with GSRP reporting.[33] For instance, a boy might be forced into a militia's ranks, a girl into the snare of an abusive marriage. Behind individual experiences, there can lie a more strategic, collective aim: Destabilizing Christian communities and families and restricting growth of Christian populations through preventing children from growing up into roles of perceived cultural value, such as mothers, fathers, employees or church leaders.

Where the gender was known and recorded, there were overall more Pressure Points reported for girls. While Pressure Points were recorded in smaller numbers for boys, some significance can be drawn from the comparison between genders; this mirrors trends in the GSRP 2021 report which also found more female-specific Pressure Points.

Tables 3, 4 and Chart 2 lists the percentage breakdown of the top gendered pressure points.

TABLE 3	
Rank	Top 3 Pressure Points for boys
1	Military/militia conscription/service against conscience
2	Abduction
3	Violence – physical

TABLE 4	
Rank	Top 3 Pressure Points for girls
1	Forced marriage
2	Violence - sexual
3	Abduction

CHART 2: TOP PRESSURE POINTS FOR BOYS AND GIRLS
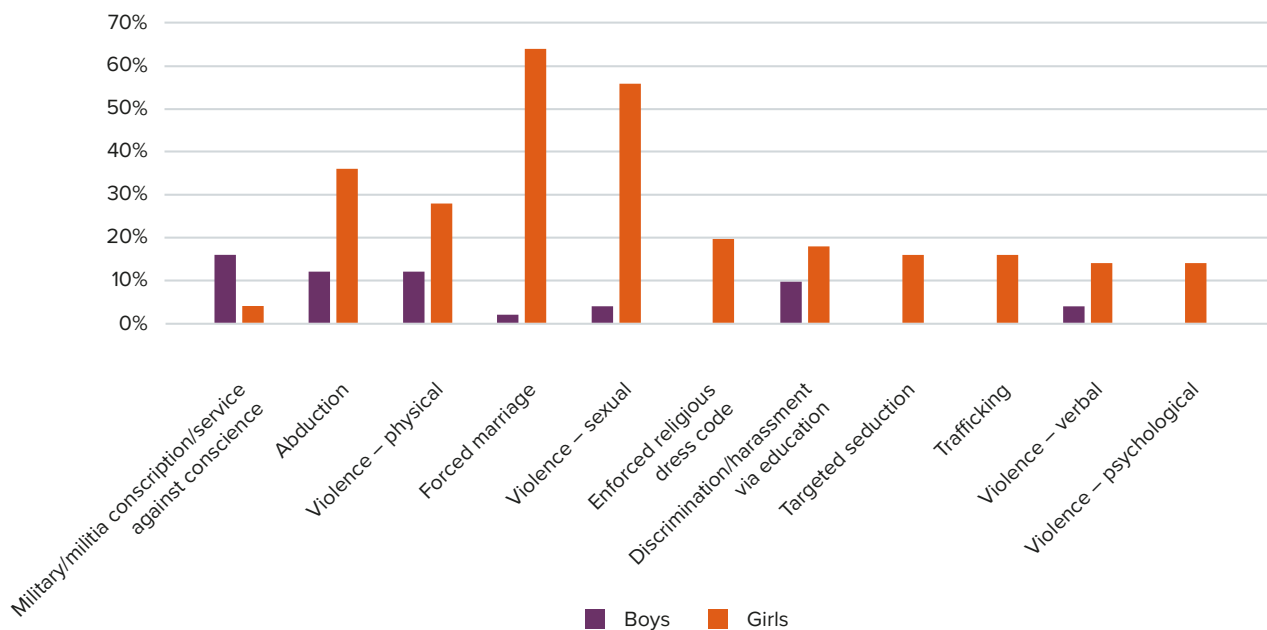
Boys

As can be seen in Chart 2, the greatest threat predominately affecting boys is forced recruitment into militias or criminal gangs. Globally, in 2019 more than 7,740 children were recruited and used as child soldiers.[34] In Latin America gangs target adolescent Christian boys, seen as easier to mold due to perceived docility, and/or to punish missionally active parents. In Africa, boys are forcibly recruited in conflict-affected countries. here are very high incidences of children being recruited into militia groups and into the security forces at a very young age," a country expert in the DRC comments, "this robs parents of the opportunity to nurture these children in the Christian way of life." Forced recruitment of boys represents a two-pronged attack: It both denies communities of sons – future breadwinners, fathers and protectors - whilst simultaneously boosting the numbers of militant groups.

Boys are more likely to lose their life than girls, albeit by a small margin. This is partly linked to the dangers of forced recruitment, or its refusal, both exposing boys to physical insecurity. It is, however, also reflective of extremists' tactics who commonly rape girls but kill boys when attacking Christian communities. Witnesses reported to a country expert in Somalia that when a family was attacked by al-Shabaab, the father and son were murdered whilst the three daughters were gang-raped.

Girls

Christian girls are at particular risk of forced marriage and due to their age have less capacity to challenge courts and families legitimizing or forcing them into marriage. Risk increases when girls reach child-bearing age in the eyes of their culture (noting that over 20% of girls are married as children in nearly half of the countries studied).[35] "Once suspected to be a believer, female converts are normally linked up with older radical men for marriage," explains a country expert in Somalia: "This is done in secret and by force, in order to return them to Islam. Once...married, the man uses rape as a tool of submission... to break her virginity and to make her pregnant so that she depends on him." COVID-19 appears to be increasing rates of both child marriage and domestic violence,[36] with married under-18s more likely to encounter violence from an intimate partner and child pregnancy.[37]

As seen in Chart 2, Forced marriage and Violence - sexual were the two most widely reported Pressure Points for girls across the WWL 2021 top 50 countries. Affiliated Pressure Points such as Abduction, Trafficking and Targeted seduction also contribute to a pattern of targeting girls for their sexual purity and marriageability. Girls are usually fully dependent on family for financial and physical security and thus highly vulnerable should persecution come from within their family unit; escape is rarely an option.

Teenage girls in Northern India.

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[34] 'Factbox: Ten facts about child soldiers around the world', Reuters, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-childsoldiers-factbox-trfn-idUSKBN2AC0CB>

[35] According to Girls Not Brides, 24 of the top 50 countries reported a child marriage rate of over 20%. A further 18 recorded a child marriage rate between 2% and 19%. Eight of the countries in the WWL 50 countries had not recorded data on child marriage, although it is understood that it is also prevalent in these countries. One such country is China for example, which lies at the heart of bride trafficking networks. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/>

[36] 'Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Family Planning and Ending Gender-based Violence, Female Genital Mutilation and Child Marriage', UNFPA Interim Technical Note, 2020. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_impact_brief_for_UNFPA_24_April_2020_1.pdf>; 'A Perfect Storm: Millions More Children At Risk Of Violence Under Lockdown And Into The 'New Normal', World Vision International, 2020. <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/Aftershocks%20FINAL%20VERSION_0.pdf>

[37] 'Stolen Future: War and Child Marriage in Northwest Syria' p.3, World Vision International, 2020. <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/Stolen%20Future-War%20and%20Child%20Marriage%20in%20Northwest%20Syria-Online.pdf> ; 'Child Marriage: a Form of Violence Against Children', Girls not Brides, 2019. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/child-marriage-a-form-of-violence-against-children/#resource-downloads>; 'COVID-19 and Child, Early and Forced Marriage: An Agenda for Action', Girls not Brides, 2020. <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/resource-centre/covid-19-and-child-early-and-forced-marriage-an-agenda-for-action/>

Conflict and CSRP-YSRP

Conflict constantly reshapes the everyday lives of communities and families in areas where fighting takes place. In conflict-affected countries, Christian children and youth are at greater risk of being killed, trafficked, displaced and forcibly recruited into government armies or militias.[38] Increased levels of violence result in the young being more likely to lose their life for their faith. In northern Cameroon, the lives of Christian children and youth are at risk from Boko Haram insurgents, with the ongoing civil war compounding the danger and often directing attention away from the renewed insurgency across the Lake Chad basin.[39] In Nigeria, a range of violent non-state actors regularly threaten Christian communities, including Boko Haram, Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Fulani militants.[40] According to Frans Veerman, Managing Director of WWR: "Nigeria is one of, if not THE hotspot of violence against Christians in the world. Many Christian children and youth are victims of abduction. They are brutally taken away from their homes or schools; girls often for sexual slavery and forced marriage, boys often for ransom or forced recruitment."

Conflict-related danger leads to higher levels of displacement with children and youth forced to flee homes and communities due to threats of violence and forced recruitment. This can result in family separation; men may stay behind to protect property while women and children leave. Life in Internally Displaced People (IDP) and refugee camps also exposes young people to other risks, with stories of children being forced to recite Islamic prayers to receive food in Sudan and attacks and abductions of Rohingya Christians in Bangladesh.[41] Research has identified that religious minorities (including Christians) have experienced isolation, stigmatization and discrimination in displacement settings due to their religious identity.[42] Refugees who flee World Watch List countries have also experienced continuing pressure in host European countries; for example, sexual violence against Christian children has been reported in refugee camps on the Greek island of Lesvos, home to thousands of refugees living in deplorable conditions, and known as a melting-pot of nationalistic and ethnic tensions.[43] The situation for unaccompanied and separated minors is of particular concern, as by nature of being alone they are highly vulnerable to trafficking and abuse.[44]

Government armies, militias and criminal groups exploit Christian children and youth in conflict zones as commodities. They are shaped into child soldiers (see page 10: Gender and CSRP-YSRP), or bought and sold as products trafficked for

Eldest daughter of widowed and destitute Christian mother, southern Ethiopia.

labor, sexual services or profit. This is more common in conflict-affected areas where people look for strategies to cope with rising levels of violence and where demand for specific services and goods increases.[45] In the worst cases, militants may abduct children and youth to be used as suicide bombers. Christians may be targeted as they are perceived to have less worth and/or to punish churches and Christian families.

Yet it is also important to recognize that young people grow up with the potential to build peace in their local communities, as acknowledged by UN Security Council Resolution 2250 on youth, peace and security.[46]

[38] Conflict affected countries determined from International Crisis Group's country profiles, in conjunction with the Global Conflict Tracker, as of January 2021: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/> , <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/?category=usConflictStatus>

[39] 'Country profile: Cameroon', International Crisis Group. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon>. See also 'Cameroon: Full Country Dossier', available at <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Cameroon-WWR-Full-Country-Dossier-March-2021.pdf> [password: freedom]

[40] See more in 'Nigeria: Full Country Dossier', available at <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Nigeria-WWR-Full-Country-Dossier-March-2021.pdf> [password: freedom]

[41] 'SUDAN: Christian refugee children must recite Islamic prayers before receiving food', ACN, 2017. <https://acnuk.org/news/sudan-christian-refugee-children-must-recite-islamic-prayers-before-receiving-food/> ; 'Christians Abducted, Attacked in Bangladesh Refugee Camp', HRW, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/13/christians-abducted-attacked-bangladesh-refugee-camp>

[42] Eghdamian, K: Journal of Refugee Studies, Volume 30, Issue 3, September 2017, Pages 447–467. <https://www.academia.edu/19705063/Religious_Minority_Experiences_of_Displacement_Initial_Lessons_Learnt_From_Syrian_Christian_and_Syrian_Druze_Refugees_in_Jordan>

[43] ''REPORT: Survey of Christian Migrants in Reception Centres on Lesvos, Greece: Religious Freedoms, Vulnerabilities and Condition as a Minority Group', International Christian Consulate, 2018. <https://www.internationalchristianconsulate.com/lesvos-report>; 'Moria: diary of a nightmare', Open Democracy, 2020. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/moria-diary-nightmare/>

[44] 'Nearly child migrants a day vanished in Europe since 2018', The Guardian, 2021 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/apr/21/nearly-17-child-migrants-a-day-vanished-in-europe-since-2018>

[45] 'Countering Trafficking in Persons in Conflict Situations', UNODC, 2018. <https://www.unodc.org/documents/human-trafficking/2018/17-08776_ebook-Countering_Trafficking_in_Persons_in_Conflict_Situations.pdf>

[46] 'Resolution 2250', UNSC, 2015. (Youth clarified as 18-29 years old) <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2250>; see also 'Negotiating peace the same old way doesn't work. Here's what does.' Autesserre, S., 2021. <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/d8-jd4q-vz82>

Implications & Conclusion

This preliminary report has found that often the younger generation are targeted more for their potential mature faith in adulthood, than for their own childhood faith.

As stated in Article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children and youth have the right and the capacity to follow the religion of their choice.[47] Yet the potential for change to a child's beliefs, due to the yet-to-be-fully-realized nature of their juvenile beliefs, creates a particularly vulnerable moment in which to influence them. Consequently, it is an expedient moment for those hostile to a particular faith to focus efforts on changing children's beliefs in order to jeopardize the future of a minority faith group. Such efforts can be characterized as isolating, identity-shaping and harsh.

In order to picture the strategy being used, it can be helpful to think in terms of pathways and gateways. If a child or youth's opportunities and choices for the future are akin to a variety of paths before them, these pathways (leading to continuing education, maturity and leadership in faith or raising a family in faith) can be guarded by gateways at key access points.

This report finds that nearly all of the top 50 World Watch List countries report some form of:

– Discrimination/harassment via education

Alongside a majority of countries reporting forms of

– Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites, and

– Denied access to a Christian parent.[48]

> **Gateways:** Short-term. Refers to access to opportunities that open and close. CSRP/YSRP aims to control these in order to influence pathways.
>
> **Pathways:** Long-term. Refers to the opportunities and options that lead to varying futures that they can choose to follow. CSRP/YSRP aims to restrict and redirect these in order to disempower the potential of future Christian communities.

Controlling Gateways

Gateways both open and close access to opportunities and well-balanced development through each stage of childhood and adolescence. Denying a child's access to certain religious teachings or to Christian parents closes the gateway to *religious education*. Christian teaching and rites, Christian churches, and Christian parents all provide opportunities for young people to learn more about Christianity. The denial of access cuts off such opportunities at the source. As stated above, the challenges facing Christian children and youth are isolating and identity-shaping; isolation may be a result

of family separation, and the restriction of choices helps determine ways in which identities are shaped.

Such guarding of gateways sheds light on the structural nature of religious discrimination, embedded in societies and institutions. State institutions such as courts and schools have significant power in separating parents from children and discriminating against Christian youth. In a few countries, such as Algeria, China and Tajikistan, under-18s are legally forbidden from joining churches or converting to Christianity. More commonly, less formal yet still powerful non-state societal structures, religious customs and social norms result in children being separated from Christian parents. Each of these supporting structures of discrimination serves to channel a child or youth's future into pathways chosen by another.

In some cases, the risks associated with passing on faith within the family are so high that parents self-censor. In countries with extreme levels of persecution, like North Korea, parents feel obliged to hide their faith from their children, due to the extreme danger for the child and the family if exposed. An expert on North Korea explains: "Christian parents…cannot directly teach Christianity to their children; it is too risky."

Other situations utilize domestic and societal mechanisms to exert control. Christian parents who converted from a Muslim background may risk repercussions for their children related to the perceived dishonor of conversion for the extended family. In this situation, immediate and extended families can exert significant pressure in order to either restrict or distort the child's understanding of Christianity and/or separate children from their parents.

Denying access to a Christian parent not only takes away an opportunity to learn about Christianity, but also removes a parent, who is a primary source of love and stability for children and key in encouraging their holistic wellbeing and development. Furthermore, it creates a traumatic separation which is intended to provoke a powerful negative association with choosing Christianity, and subconsciously invite children and youth to avoid this same painful fate. It can even raise in the child's mind the question of how much the Christian parent loves them. If mother or father appear to love – or be required by their faith to hold on to – their Christian God to the point of accepting separation from their child, who is this God?

Pathways which shape and direct

A child's future is often shaped by the different paths they are offered for growth in life: for their religion or belief, their work and their family and societal roles. These paths stretch into the future and the further down a particular path the child progresses, the more difficult it can become to change course.

When the gateways above close, denying a Christian child access to their Christian parent/home, this simultaneously opens a gateway to forms of control or opposition from within their (now) non-Christian home. It sets the child on a pathway of familial religious instruction and guidance controlled by actors hostile to the choice of Christian faith. In general, a child is inherently both massively and diversely vulnerable within the domestic sphere as they are completely dependent upon adults for both physical survival (food and shelter) as well as their emotional and psychological well-being. During

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[47] Article 14, Convention on the Rights of the Child, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/ProfessionalInterest/crc.pdf>
[48] These occur in 98%, 94% and 84% of countries respectively.

the developmentally immature stages of childhood, the need for belonging, affection and nurture - in order to construct an individual's identity - is so high that survival dictates a certain level of conformity to the immediate requirements for behavior and professed belief.

When a child's path for education is restricted, it statistically leads to reduced socio-economic status.[49] As noted above in Spotlight: Education , such restricted paths often lead to other vulnerabilities such as child marriage, trafficking and physical violence.

Young boys from the Nasa-Páez indigenous community in Colombia.

In Colombia, indigenous students receive an education that promotes their ancestral traditions. This situation puts strong pressure on indigenous Christian families, especially those living in distant areas where indigenous boarding schools are the only option to access education. Indigenous Christian families struggle with this difficult situation and often choose not to send their children to school, which clearly limits their future possibilities. If they try to access education in public schools away from the indigenous area, ethnic authorities often refuse them the legal documents they need and/or restrict Christian children from leaving the area.

Creating future vulnerabilities to exploit

Taking the pathways analysis one step further, the channeling of a less-favored population away from pathways which lead to stable, respected and influential situations in adulthood *simultaneously* frees coveted places on such pathways for others, notably those of the dominant religion or belief. The *poverty cycle* for one religious population and the *privilege cycle* for a separate religious population[50] are thereby increasingly reinforced with each generation.

In Mozambique, early and forced marriages negatively affect Christian families and communities. Child brides are unlikely to be physically or emotionally ready to become wives and mothers. They face more risks of experiencing dangerous complications in pregnancy and childbirth, contracting HIV/AIDS and suffering domestic violence. With little access to education and economic opportunities, they and their families are more likely to live in poverty therefore continuing the cycle.

In the populations studied by this report, once the young Christian generation reaches adulthood, they can find themselves definitively entrenched in a number of harmful and spiraling cycles. The most obvious are those of poverty, stigma and violence due to enculturation. In the Central African Republic, boys and men can be subject to torture, threats, arbitrary detentions, searches and robberies, and forced labor.

Because they are often accused of conspiring with elements of the Anti-balaka militia or of being members of said militia, this is a way to make them vulnerable, inefficient and poor in order to better dominate them and push them to change their Christian convictions.

Assuming the individual has held onto their Christian faith, these conditioned situations and identities can then be further exploited. The resulting vulnerabilities often become visible in situations of unemployment, ill-health, poor nutrition or insecure housing. These unfavorable circumstances increase vulnerabilities to certain Pressure Points in adulthood. Already, Christian men and boys face high rates of physical violence, imprisonment and economic harassment, and Christian women and girls encounter forced marriage, sexual violence, and physical violence, imprisonment and economic harassment, and Christian women and girls encounter forced marriage, sexual violence, and physical violence as investigated in gender-specific religious persecution reporting.[51]

The result is the perpetuation of a vicious cycle, with fewer opportunities as adults and ever-increasing vulnerability, which then becomes the starting point for their own children's vulnerabilities to persecution. This has the potential to be an ongoing long-term reality for generations of the Church. An Open Doors expert on youth from the Middle East comments: "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 so 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."

[49] Education increases earnings by 9% for each extra year of schooling. 'Returns to Investment in Education : A Decennial Review of the Global Literature. Policy Research Working Paper; No. 8402.' Psacharopoulos, G., Patrinos, H.A. 2018, World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/29672>
[50] The accent on the religious identity of a population does not negate the reality that other identifiers for each population such as ethnicity, caste or tribe may be intertwined and reinforcing attributes in the othering of each population.
[51] 2021 GSRP, <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/GSRP-Report-%E2%80%93-Same-Faith-Different-Persecution-%E2%80%93-March-2021.pdf> [password: freedom]

Reinforcing natural resilience and personal faith of children and youth

Despite this discouraging narrative, research shows that children have an inherent and visceral capacity to resist, adapt and overcome challenges – up to a point.[52] Adversity to faith has the potential to reinforce their sense of self, and well-meaning adult supporters helping children and youth to respond to persecuting or discriminating acts should never minimize a child's ability to find faith, but rather nurture and affirm the young person's power and resilience.

The strengthening narratives which local faith actors (LFAs) can bring to young people as they are facing adverse circumstances promote children's individual gifts and capacity for action.

According to a Middle Eastern expert: "Churches know they need the youth for their churches to survive another generation, but they don't see them or know how to interact with them as an integral part of the Church *today*."

This expert concludes: "LFAs have the opportunity to make churches the institution that most value the youth contribution, most empower youth, and even become known for the way that their youth use their gifts and work in collaboration with multi-generational community to bring transformation in both Church and society."

Conclusion

If children can be prevented from growing up as Christians - occupying valued roles in society, and as parents of future Christians, fewer resources will be needed by future agents of persecution to remove a smaller, weakened Christian community in generations to come.

Strategically targeting an unwanted minority religious community at its most vulnerable has been happening for millennia, notably recorded in the deliberate, silent targeting of babies in Egypt in the Judeo-Christian narrative. Such an old pattern of the attack on children – eliminate boys as future warriors, keep the girls as future child-bearers who can be assimilated into the dominant population[53]– resonates unfortunately all too well with the findings of this report.

Recognizing the end goals of CSRP-YSRP and the risks can encourage LFAs and policy makers to work together to ensure the broadest space of religious freedom for children and youth as they grow into their own unique spirituality. Policy makers can ensure that the intersection of children's rights with religious faith (or belonging to a family with religious faith) is recognized as an additional vulnerability. Together, adults committed to religious freedom can work to preserve the opportunity for children and youth to learn and grow in the faith of their parents and the child's right to and developing capacity to explore freedom of religion or belief.

A young Egyptian boy watching over his city.

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[52] 'Resilience in Children: Developmental Perspectives.' Masten AS, Barnes AJ. Children. 2018; 5(7):98. <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-9067/5/7/98>
[53] Fisher, Miller and Sauer, 'Wounded Because of Religion: Identifying the Components of Gender-Specific Religious Persecution of Christians', Mission Studies 38 (2021) pp. 119-141, available at <https://brill.com/view/journals/mist/38/1/mist.38.issue-1.xml>