

Open Doors

Pathways (un)locked

2023 CHILDREN AND YOUTH INTERIM UPDATE

As children grow up, thoughts often turn to what their future jobs will be, what their families might look like or how their spiritual life might develop. What if a factor shaping each of these futures was religious persecution?

Three years of specific religious persecution (SRP) research on Christian children and youth in World Watch List (WWL) countries has found that experiencing faith-based discrimination, harassment and violence can fundamentally alter their whole lives. The persecution they experience is typically:

ISOLATING, HARSH AND IDENTITY-SHAPING

2023 results[1] confirm a widespread pattern of targeting young Christians through discrimination and harassment at school, psychological and verbal violence, and being denied access to parents who are Christian. Access to Bibles, youth groups and other sources of Christian teaching and materials can also be restricted in an attempt to dissuade them from faith. Each of these Pressure Points can restrict or redirect the "pathways" of children and youth – their long term futures.

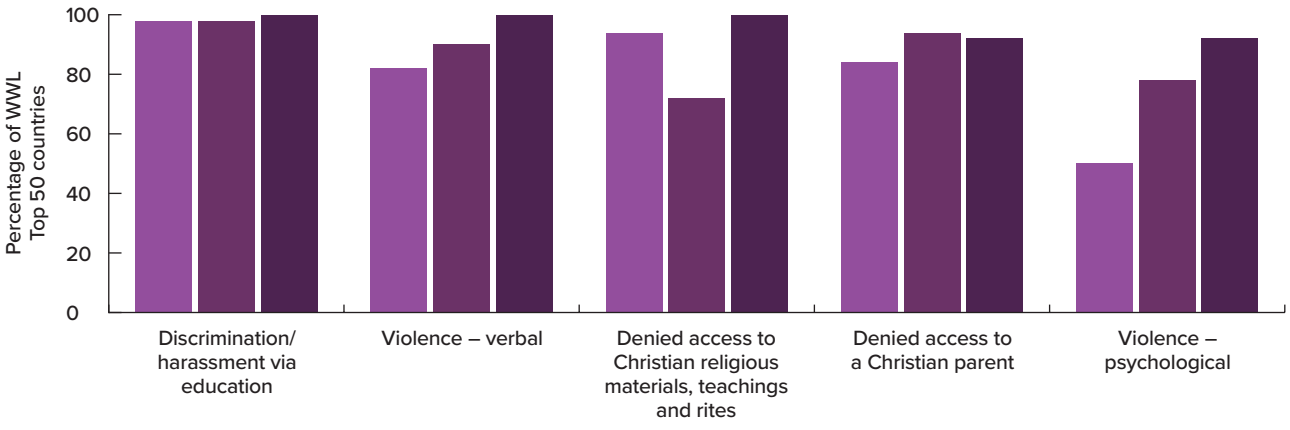
Discrimination/harassment via education has been the top Pressure Point for Christian children and youth for three years. Moreover, school is a key location for other Pressure Points to take place, such verbal and psychological violence. For example, in Bangladesh, convert Christians may struggle to even be admitted to the school in their village; families have few other options besides sending their child away for education, or leaving the village altogether. A local Christian explains one of the impacts of this on children's pathways: "If you live in a society where you don't have respect from other people, the believers' children will struggle with having good mental health in the long run. They can be depressed."[2]

As such, the effects of specific religious persecution **can ripple out to children and youth's families, their experience of faith and their future lives.**

> **100% OF WWL TOP 50 COUNTRIES REPORTED DISCRIMINATION/HARASSMENT VIA EDUCATION AS A PRESSURE POINT FOR CHRISTIAN CHILDREN AND YOUTH**

To read our full previous reports and our research methodology, see Open Doors Analytical: Children/Youth-specific religious persecution [password: freedom]

CHILDREN AND YOUTH TOP PRESSURE POINTS: 2021-2023



[1] 2023 results are drawn from the 2023 WWL reporting period (1 October 2021 – 31 September 2022).

[2] See for example: Childhood Experiences and Psychological Distress: Can Benevolent Childhood Experiences Counteract the Negative Effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences? Hou, H., et al, Frontiers in Psychology. 25 February 2022.

The Tadesse Twins

Fasil and Ezana Tadesse* are twin brothers from a seemingly peaceful village in Ethiopia, where lush trees and meadows abound. At first glance, it looks like a wonderful village for two young boys to grow up in. However - their village has long been an unwelcome place for evangelical Christians. The Tadesse family are evangelical Christians, the religious minority group in the area. Their pastor recalls death threats that new converts receive if they choose to follow Jesus.

The twins' father, Ermias*, has experienced persecution firsthand. As an evangelist he has been attacked for sharing his faith and has seen the church stoned by assailants during worship. He and his wife are all too aware that persecution doesn't only impact the adults, but also their sons. For example, regardless of their academic ability, because the twins are Christians their test scores would be purposely lowered so that their grades do not reflect their true capabilities.

The twins now attend a bridge school, an Open Doors-supported project that creates a 'bridge' between the Christian community and surrounding neighbourhood. Primarily set up for church-related activity, it is also a safe place for Christian children to get the education they deserve free from persecution. A bridge school offers non-religious based education which is open to all children regardless of their faith.

ANALYSIS

An incident of persecution can last much longer than it first appears. The effects of a case of violence or harassment can ripple out to family, friends and church members. When the lives of evangelical Christians are threatened, the whole religious community can be affected; it can shape how they perceive the community they live in and their Christian faith.

In Ethiopia, Discrimination/harassment via education has been recorded as a Pressure point for Christian children and youth for the past three years. As well as lowering test scores, Christian children are also at risk of being bullied by peers and teachers. For example, other children may be forbidden from becoming friends with them and some teachers may try to humiliate Christian children in class.

Education is a key factor in shaping the future opportunities of children and teenagers such as Fasil and Ezana. Access to good schooling where Christians won't be marked down or harassed because of their faith can expand the options for their pathways in life. For example, they could access a wider range of leadership opportunities in their communities and churches, and more jobs might be available to them. Alternatively, discrimination or harassment in education can restrict children's pathways and embed cycles of stigma and poverty within Christian communities and families.

**Names changed for security*

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Train, support and involve local faith actors in the discussions with the religious community leaders for the elimination of harmful practices inflicted on children, including actively contributing towards the elimination of such practices whenever they occur;
- Encourage states to remove all religiously biased referrals from their educational curricula and bring punitive action against any person found to be harassing the child due to his or her religious background.

See the full list of recommendations for children and youth SRP in the 2022 report here.



Ermias Tadesse reading with his twin sons