Open Doors

A WEB OF FORCES

THE 2023 GENDER REPORT



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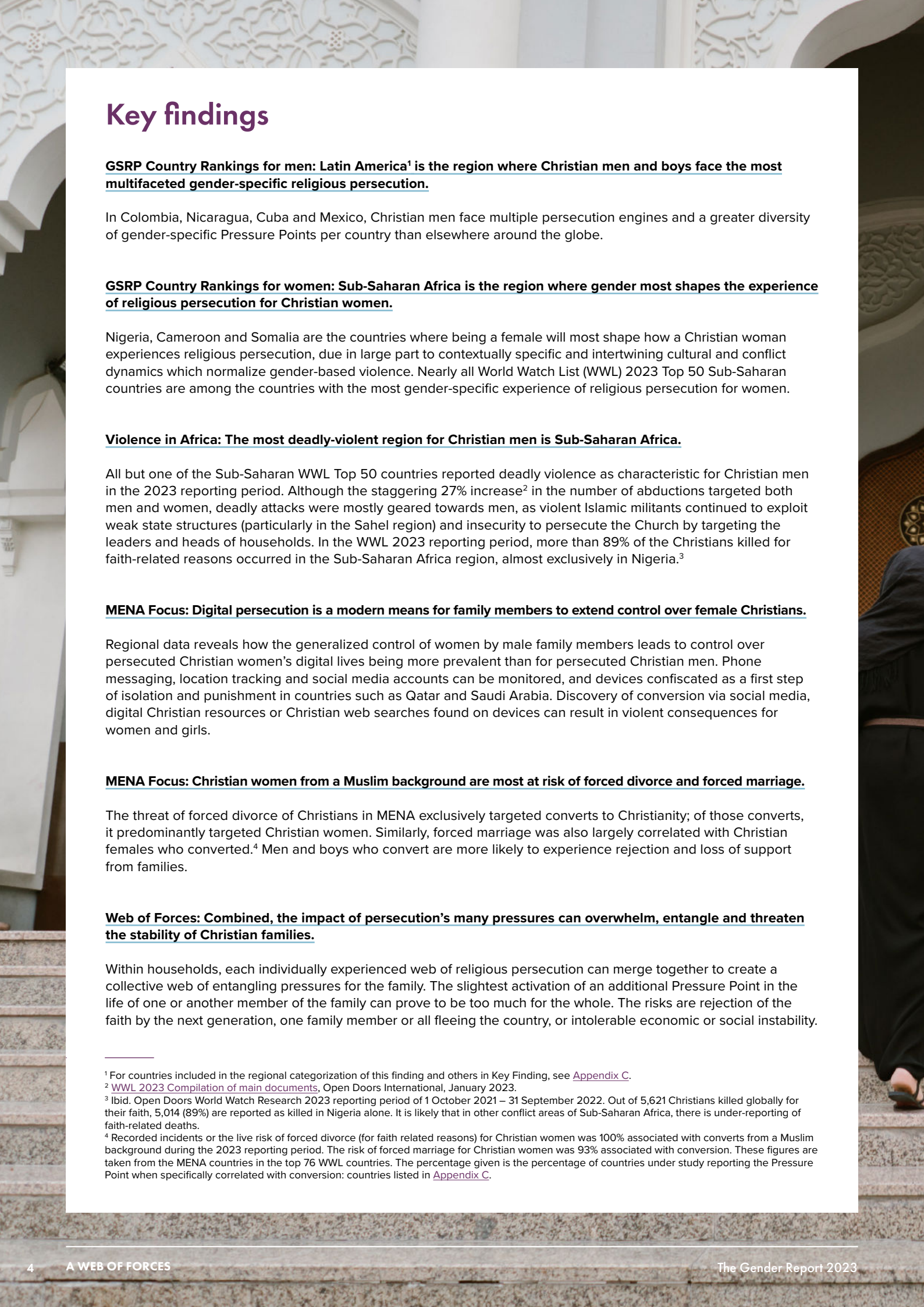
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Combined, the impact of persecution's many pressures can overwhelm, entangle and threaten the stability of Christian families.



Key findings

GSRP Country Rankings for men: Latin America[1] is the region where Christian men and boys face the most multifaceted gender-specific religious persecution.

In Colombia, Nicaragua, Cuba and Mexico, Christian men face multiple persecution engines and a greater diversity of gender-specific Pressure Points per country than elsewhere around the globe.

GSRP Country Rankings for women: Sub-Saharan Africa is the region where gender most shapes the experience of religious persecution for Christian women.

Nigeria, Cameroon and Somalia are the countries where being a female will most shape how a Christian woman experiences religious persecution, due in large part to contextually specific and intertwining cultural and conflict dynamics which normalize gender-based violence. Nearly all World Watch List (WWL) 2023 Top 50 Sub-Saharan countries are among the countries with the most gender-specific experience of religious persecution for women.

Violence in Africa: The most deadly-violent region for Christian men is Sub-Saharan Africa.

All but one of the Sub-Saharan WWL Top 50 countries reported deadly violence as characteristic for Christian men in the 2023 reporting period. Although the staggering 27% increase[2] in the number of abductions targeted both men and women, deadly attacks were mostly geared towards men, as violent Islamic militants continued to exploit weak state structures (particularly in the Sahel region) and insecurity to persecute the Church by targeting the leaders and heads of households. In the WWL 2023 reporting period, more than 89% of the Christians killed for faith-related reasons occurred in the Sub-Saharan Africa region, almost exclusively in Nigeria.[3]

MENA Focus: Digital persecution is a modern means for family members to extend control over female Christians.

Regional data reveals how the generalized control of women by male family members leads to control over persecuted Christian women's digital lives being more prevalent than for persecuted Christian men. Phone messaging, location tracking and social media accounts can be monitored, and devices confiscated as a first step of isolation and punishment in countries such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Discovery of conversion via social media, digital Christian resources or Christian web searches found on devices can result in violent consequences for women and girls.

MENA Focus: Christian women from a Muslim background are most at risk of forced divorce and forced marriage.

The threat of forced divorce of Christians in MENA exclusively targeted converts to Christianity; of those converts, it predominantly targeted Christian women. Similarly, forced marriage was also largely correlated with Christian females who converted.[4] Men and boys who convert are more likely to experience rejection and loss of support from families.

Web of Forces: Combined, the impact of persecution's many pressures can overwhelm, entangle and threaten the stability of Christian families.

Within households, each individually experienced web of religious persecution can merge together to create a collective web of entangling pressures for the family. The slightest activation of an additional Pressure Point in the life of one or another member of the family can prove to be too much for the whole. The risks are rejection of the faith by the next generation, one family member or all fleeing the country, or intolerable economic or social instability.

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[1] For countries included in the regional categorization of this finding and others in Key Finding, see Appendix C.
[2] WWL 2023 Compilation of main documents, Open Doors International, January 2023.
[3] Ibid. Open Doors World Watch Research 2023 reporting period of 1 October 2021 – 31 September 2022. Out of 5,621 Christians killed globally for their faith, 5,014 (89%) are reported as killed in Nigeria alone. It is likely that in other conflict areas of Sub-Saharan Africa, there is under-reporting of faith-related deaths.
[4] Recorded incidents or the live risk of forced divorce (for faith related reasons) for Christian women was 100% associated with converts from a Muslim background during the 2023 reporting period. The risk of forced marriage for Christian women was 93% associated with conversion. These figures are taken from the MENA countries in the top 76 WWL countries. The percentage given is the percentage of countries under study reporting the Pressure Point when specifically correlated with conversion: countries listed in Appendix C.

Introduction

Theme of this report: Web of Forces

In nature, webs are spun and set with the sole purpose of capturing prey. Intricate and cleverly constructed fine threads are interconnected, creating a complex network that entangles its victim. In persecution, it works the same way. Each pressure or threat on its own may be like one fine filament – deceptively marketing itself as inconsequential. Combined, however, they are dreadfully effective.

Six years of gender-specific religious persecution (GSRP) research findings confirm that whether for men or women, boys or girls, religious persecution is rarely experienced as a single, isolated Pressure Point. Although persecution is more *focused* for men and more *complex* for women, both genders are likely to experience the webbing nature of persecution either through the *multiplicity of areas* in which they experience coercion or punishment, or the *multiplicity of actors* who perpetrate these acts.

Introducing a new element: GSRP Country Rankings

New this year, GSRP Country Rankings show where gender most shapes religious persecution. While the World Watch List (WWL) shows which countries are most hostile to the exercise of Christian faith, the GSRP Country Rankings show where the expression of that hostility to Christianity most often utilizes the means of differing gender norms or discrimination in legal, economic, and social contexts.

Using the same data set as the WWL, the relative risk and cumulative risk of gender-specific Pressure Points in each country was evaluated (see Methodology). The result is two lists:

- GSRP Country Rankings for men: Where gender most shapes religious persecution for men & boys
- GSRP Country Rankings for women: Where gender most shapes religious persecution for women & girls

The intention is that this will spark new conversations regarding religious persecution, opening opportunities for more awareness and focused advocacy and church action in national contexts.

Focusing on the Middle East and North Africa

This report features a more detailed examination of results for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, with an emphasis on the complexity facing Christian women, and spotlights digital persecution and the experience of converts.

Christian women in MENA from a non-Christian background are especially at risk of being trapped in a web of oppression due to their gender, their faith and other socio-cultural and legal factors in their lives which create vulnerability. Research shows familial standards of fidelity and connection in societies of the MENA region often pose the greatest threat to Christians who convert from Islam. The unique experience of Christians with a Muslim background is particularly subject to control in the domestic sphere. Pressure Points combine to produce a sharp limitation of resources and opportunities which would allow the religious convert freedom in the future.

The MENA focus also unpacks the everyday pressures facing men and boys as well as more extreme forms of persecution such as government interrogation or imprisonment.

Space for change exists

A common refrain regarding gender-based violence and general equality for women is that the status today is far better than it once was. While the authors here largely agree with such sentiments, the research unit continues to release reports based on annually gathered data that highlights the ongoing prevalence of gender-targeted discrimination and its effective use as a means of religious persecution.

Furthermore, as 30 years of WWL data shows: the trends of religious persecution are of increased severity. Religious persecution is increasing – and recognizing the commonplace, yet specific, gender-specific forms in which religious persecution manifests can allow advocates and practitioners alike to be better informed regarding the necessary steps to decrease the scope for persecution throughout legal systems and through community responses.

2023 Gender-specific Pressure Points

Across the world, Christians live in places hostile to their faith. They are persecuted because their chosen religion is not the majority or state-accepted religion. Churches might be burned or forced to close; individual Christians face the threat of imprisonment if the authorities or their neighbors hear them talking about their faith in public. These Christians are under pressure or threat of violence simply because of their chosen beliefs.

Sometimes persecution is meted out equally to all people in similar forms. Other times it is differentiated and targeted. In many contexts, men or women experience religious persecution in gender-specific forms. Sometimes these gender-specific manifestations target the perceived or highly valued strengths of a particular gender. For instance, a man's leadership within the family or community – or a woman's ability to bear children.

Sometimes, in a manner reminiscent of a military tactician, religious persecution focuses on a person's vulnerabilities. It may seem counter-intuitive that vulnerabilities may be directly connected to perceived strengths. However, if a persecutor can undermine or remove a person's strengths, then that individual is left without value or purpose in his or her society. Thus, it can be difficult to determine if an assigned societal or family role is a strength or a vulnerability.

TOP PRESSURES AFFECTING CHRISTIAN MEN AND BOYS

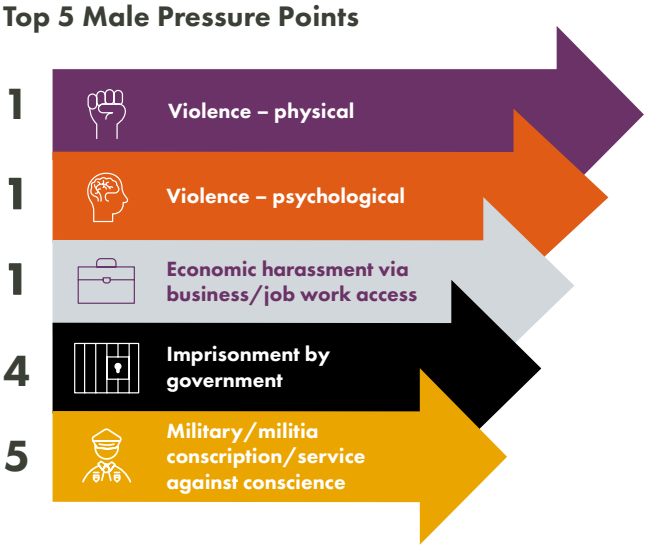
Across multiple years of gender-specific research, questionnaire responses continually point to five Pressure Points of religious persecution characteristic of that facing men and boys: economic harassment, physical violence, psychological violence, governmental imprisonment and military/militia conscription.[5]

2023 GSRP research findings confirm that Christian men and boys consistently face **forms of religious persecution that target their socially expected roles as leaders, protectors and financial providers.** The physical and psychological violence[6] encountered by male Christians is effective in removing them from such roles. Imprisonment by government can literally remove them from public society.



In India, Vijay's church was destroyed by local authorities. He was also deprived of all village privileges and received threats to recant his faith.

Top 5 Male Pressure Points



72% of countries where Christians risk the highest levels of persecution record economic harassment via business, job or work access as being characteristic of the male experience.

Economic coercion and control are also widely experienced by Christian men across WWL countries.[7] This includes forms of economic discrimination, such as in India, where a regional expert describes how male Christians "living in rural parts of the country are frequently socially ostracized which **includes client boycotts from their small shops or businesses…[and] are obstructed in getting a permit to run their businesses."**[8] Christian men can also be denied a job or promotion, while converts to Christianity risk being forced out of their job if their conversion becomes known.

GSRP research into the WWL Top 50 discovered that respondents in 34% of WWL Top 50 countries explicitly reference the socio-cultural expectations of male roles, particularly that of financial provider, as a reason behind the gender-specific forms of persecution experienced by Christian men and boys. This reflects a growing awareness of how patriarchal societal norms can facilitate religious persecution. For example, "Men are seen as providers and heads of the homes in the Cameroonian context." A regional expert continues, "They are expected to work and feed their families and take care of the general welfare of the families." The expectation that men are the sole providers for their families and leaders in their communities can be weaponized through the religious persecution they experience while in such roles, which jeopardizes the security of their whole family.

[5] See Appendix B for further details of top ranking gender-specific Pressure Points from 2019-2023.
[6] Physical and psychological violence have been consistently among the top Pressure Points that are characteristic of persecution pressures targeting males. Out of the Top 50 WWL countries, 72% recorded the occurrence(s) or active risk of psychological violence in 2023 reporting, 68% in 2022, 66% in 2021, 56% in 2020, and 44% in 2019. Likewise, 72% recorded physical violence in 2023 reporting, 80% in 2022, 86% in 2021, 72% in 2020, 84% in 2019. These percentages reflect the extent, but not the severity, of violence.
[7] Economic harassment has been consistently among the top Pressure Points that are characteristic of persecution pressures targeting males. Out of the Top 50 WWL countries, 72% recorded the occurrence(s) or active risk of psychological violence in 2023 reporting, 66% in 2022, 74% in 2021, 66% in 2020 and 72% in 2019.
[8] For more information, see for example: The grammar of caste: Economic discrimination in contemporary India. Deshpande, A., Oxford University Press, 2011.

GSRP COUNTRY RANKINGS FOR MEN

Latin American countries are the four highest scoring countries in the top 20 countries where gender most shapes the experience of persecution for male Christians: Colombia, Nicaragua, Cuba and Mexico. **This does not mean that male Christians face the highest levels of persecution in Latin America. Instead, it means that Christian men and boys face religious persecution that is most influenced by their gender in the Latin American countries under study.**[9]

GSRP Country Rankings for men	
Male Ranking	**Country**
1	Colombia
2	Nicaragua
3	Cuba
3	Mexico
5	Nigeria
6	India
7	Cameroon
7	Sudan
9	Pakistan
10	Bangladesh
11	Kazakhstan
11	Comoros
13	Vietnam
14	Syria
14	Somalia
16	Tajikistan
16	Libya
18	Burkina Faso
18	Ethiopia
20	Eritrea

Furthermore, when looking at the four countries at the top of the list (Colombia, Nicaragua, Cuba and Mexico), it is important to recognize that **not all male Christians are vulnerable to the same levels of persecution within each country.** For example, in Mexico, Christians from the indigenous community are vulnerable to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) violations that overlap with their vulnerabilities as a minority ethnic group;[10] in other places within the same country, Christian leaders who take a stand for integrity and non-violence are vulnerable to religious persecution because of the existing organized crime and corruption.[11]

> **KEY FINDING #1:**
>
> Latin America is the region where Christian men and boys face the most multifaceted gender-specific religious persecution.

Economic harassment via fines, forced displacement and disappearance, including physical violence and death, were a present threat for Christian men in all four Latin American countries during the reporting period. **Arbitrary arrests and detentions by state actors, however, were the greatest dangers to male Christians**, accounting for a majority of the various reported cases of religious oppression in the region. **Church leaders, who tend to be male in Latin America, are particularly vulnerable to violence and discrimination.** For example, in Colombia, "extortion has increased sharply." A regional expert explains, "extortion payments … are charged to pastors and leaders individually or as representatives of the church, or both." This has consequences not only for the men themselves, who can experience acute financial anxiety. If such situations escalate, men who take a faith-based stand against corruption and organized crime are often at risk of abduction, beatings and killings.[12] This can also manufacture fear within families and congregations who are at risk by extension, and trigger internal displacement of the leaders and their families.

Other countries of note in the Top 20:

- India, where Pew Research reports that beliefs around traditional gender roles in the family are commonly held[13]
- Nigeria, where the highest number of Christians were killed for their faith in the WWL 2023 reporting period[14]
- Nigeria, Cameroon and Sudan which ranked fifth and joint seventh for male Christians and were also in the top four countries for where gender most shapes persecution for female Christians
- Pakistan and Sudan which ranked within the top 10; both countries recorded instances of sexual violence for male Christians, with only one other country in the top 50 reporting this as a threat.

[9] The GSRP Country Rankings are determined by evaluating the cumulative risk of Pressure Points in each country for each gender. They reflected reported instances of gender-specific religious persecution and are dependent on qualitative and quantitative responses within WWL questionnaires. See Methodology.
[10] For more information, see for example: Belief and belonging: Indigenous identity and freedom of religion or belief. CSW, October 2022.
[11] For more information, see Regional Focus: Latin America, page 23.
[12] Ibid.
[13] For example, India is behind only Tunisia and Indonesia in terms of percentage of adults who say marriage with traditional gender roles is more satisfying. How Indians View Gender Roles in Families and Society. Pew Research Center, 2 March 2022.
[14] WWL 2023: Compilation of main documents. Open Doors International, January 2023.

TOP PRESSURES AFFECTING CHRISTIAN WOMEN AND GIRLS

Globally, **Christian women and girls often find themselves caught in a particularly complex web of compounding vulnerabilities**. They are not only vulnerable as Christians in the WWL countries, but their additional gender-determined vulnerabilities overlap and interact to a greater extent than for Christian men and boys in the same contexts. These are environments where all females experience a disadvantaged status as women before the law or in society, bias against their lack of education or an elevated risk of poverty.[15] These multiple vulnerabilities compound one another – like the multiplying forces of compound interest in a bank. Religious persecution exploits the existence of these many interlinking and compounding forces, aggravating the damage to individual women and girls, their families and their communities.

> Faith-based sexual violence is recorded as a risk for Christian women and girls in 86% of the WWL Top 50 countries.

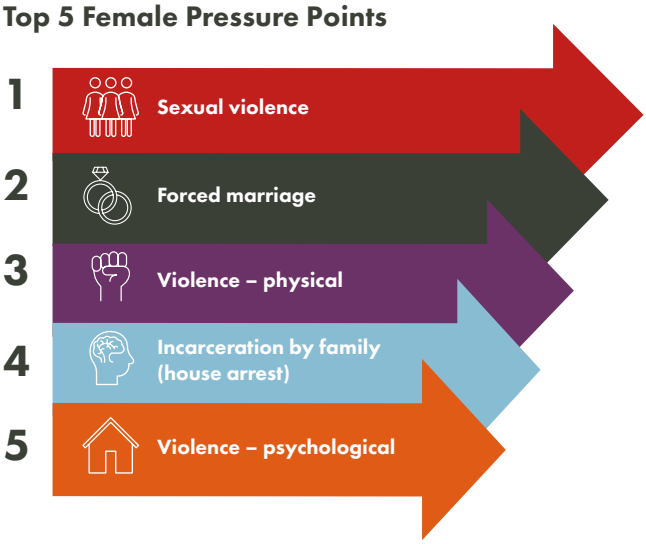
Sexual violence is consistently chosen time and time again to target Christian women and girls across the globe. Over the last six years of GSRP research, in every year but one, sexual violence has been characteristic of the religious persecution of women in the highest number of countries.[16] For researchers looking at the use of sexual violence against Christian women and girls, it is essential to recognize that there is more to their experience than counting how many incidents are reported to have taken place in a certain place at a certain time (although this may be useful in part).

Accurately understanding how Christian women and girls experience religious persecution includes **recognizing a confluence of factors that enables, encourages, hides and intensifies such abuse**. Sexual violence is often one strand in a web of other Pressure Points such as psychological violence, abduction, forced marriage and enforced religious dress code. From lack of legislation on child marriage to associations of certain modes of dress with sexual availability, a multiplicity of vulnerability factors can facilitate violent forms of gender-specific religious persecution.



Baldina's son was killed by Boko Haram, with her other son fleeing their village in the Far North of Cameroon for safety.

Top 5 Female Pressure Points



The physical and psychol-emotional severity of sexual violence is considerable and well-understood, but **the effectiveness of sexual violence is also due to the myriad of damaging consequences** that can ensue. A web of complicit forces can worsen its impact and lead to loss of shelter, food, future opportunities and community.

For example, in Bangladesh: "Sexual abuse may be the most common way to persecute Christian women and girls. **It assumes that a woman's sexual purity is equivalent to her worth and that losing this purity will dishonor her family and ostracize the community. She may even be at risk of being prosecuted** for an "unethical" act" of which she was a victim." A regional expert continues, "Many Christian women and girls do not report their assault for fear of the consequences." It is because of this "fear of consequences" that living in silence is an all-too-common experience for survivors of sexual violence.[17] In Bangladesh, where social ostracization of rape survivors is common, perpetrators can take advantage of an environment where there are low rates of reporting knowing that they can commit sexual violence with impunity.

One of the places that the sexual abuse of Christian women hides is targeted, religiously motivated abduction for the purposes of trafficking. This was reported in 32% of WWL countries[18] for the 2023 period, and more fully reported on by WWR in 2021.[19]

An enduring finding of GSRP research is that female Christians face higher levels of complexity of persecution, meaning that women and girls consistently experience a greater variety of Pressure Points than Christian men. Throughout the WWL 2023 reporting period, women and girls were at risk of an average of 9.4 Pressure Points per country; by comparison, men and boys were at risk of 7.8. This does not communicate whether female Christians experience more persecution than men, but instead that the web of persecution which surrounds then is characterized by having more filaments, representing a wider variety of types of persecution.

[15] See for example: Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/2022: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security & Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2021.; 2020 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index. UNDP, 2020.; A new era for girls: Taking stock of 25 years of progress. UNICEF, March 2020.
[16] Sexual violence has been consistently among the top Pressure Points that are characteristic of persecution pressures targeting females. Out of the Top 50 WWL countries, 86% recorded the occurrence(s) or active risk of psychological violence in 2023 reporting, 90% in 2022, 86% in 2021, 84% in 2020, and 88% in 2019.
[17] Out of the silence: towards grassroots and trauma-informed support for people who have experienced sexual violence and abuse. Sweeney, A., et al., Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences 28(6), pp.598-602, 2019.
[18] Central African Republic, Comoros, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, Afghanistan, China, India, Laos, North Korea, Pakistan, Colombia, Mexico and Libya.
[19] Same Faith Different Persecution: WWR 2021 GSRP Report. Open Doors International, 1 March 2021. [password: freedom].

GSRP COUNTRY RANKINGS FOR WOMEN

Out of the top 20 countries where gender most shapes the experience of persecution for female Christians, 12 are from Sub-Saharan Africa, including the four countries which rank the highest: Nigeria, Cameroon, Somalia and Sudan. **This does not mean that Christian women and girls face more persecution in Sub-Saharan Africa; instead, that being female has the biggest influence on their experience of persecution in the region.[20]**

KEY FINDING #2:

Sub-Saharan Africa is the region where gender most shapes the experience of religious persecution for Christian women.

In Cameroon, a range of factors contribute to this honing of religious persecution along gender lines, including "**pre-existing cultural and traditional discriminatory norms and practices** which make women and girls more vulnerable to persecution." A regional expert continues, "the **lack of legal criminalization of domestic violence and marital rape** is a major gap in the protection of women's rights. Moreover, **settlement patterns and overcrowded homes** do not allow women and girls to carry out their intimate activities away from the eyes of other community members." Such a lack of privacy creates opportunities for religiously motivated violence in what should be the most basic protected personal spaces for women and girls.

In the **northern regions of Nigeria**, where Christians already experience the most extreme levels of violence in the region,[21] **female Christians are facing especially high levels of abduction, forced displacement, trafficking, killings and sexual violence.** Gender-specific violence is driven primarily by Islamic militant activity in the region.[22] High levels ofinternal displacement can also exacerbate the vulnerability of Christian women and girls to abduction and sexual violence.

Other countries of note in the Top 20:

- India and Pakistan, where Pew Research and Solotaroff and Pande report persistent and diverse forms of violence against women and girls against a backdrop of regionally specific traditional patriarchal norms[23]
- Iran, where protests sparked by the death in September 2022 of Mahsa Amini in police custody, detained under hijab laws, have challenged ongoing gender injustices[24]
- Afghanistan, where Amnesty International has documented how the Taliban have reversed much of the progress made on women's rights since returning to power in August 2021.[25]

GSRP Country Rankings for women	
Female Ranking	**Country**
1	Nigeria
2	Cameroon
3	Somalia
4	Sudan
5	Syria
6	Ethiopia
7	Niger
8	India
8	Pakistan
10	Mali
11	Iran
12	Mozambique
13	Eritrea
14	Burkina Faso
15	Central African Republic
16	Afghanistan
16	Democratic Republic of the Congo
18	Colombia
19	Egypt
20	Tunisia

[20] The GSRP Country Rankings are determined by evaluating the cumulative risk of Pressure Points in each country for each gender. They reflected reported instances of gender-specific religious persecution and are dependent on qualitative and quantitative responses within WWL questionnaires. See Methodology.
[21] WWL 2023: Compilation of main documents. Open Doors International, January 2023.
[22] For more information, see Sub-Saharan Africa, page 20.
[23] Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation. Pew Research Center, 29 June 2021.; Violence against Women and Girls: Lessons from South Asia. Solotaroff, J.L. & Pande, R.P., 2014.
[24] 'It's Like a War Out There.' Iran's Women Haven't Been This Angry in a Generation. Moaveni, A., The New York Times, 7 October 2022.
[25] Death In Slow Motion: Women And Girls Under Taliban Rule. Amnesty International, 2022.

Global legal framework

Almost all of the Pressure Points and, indeed, the very notion of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), are protected by a host of international laws and treaties. The catalogue of gender-specific religious persecution findings in six years of World Watch Research reporting details individual suffering for legally defensible personal beliefs.

International human rights law, comprised of multiple treaty types, protects the freedom to religion or belief and equality under the law on the basis of sex, in foundational documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) focuses solely on the aim of gender equality, addressing foundational discrimination against women.

The chart below offers a selection of the most frequently contravened by GSRP and which the advocate might reference.

International laws and treaties most relevant for GSRP

Treaty	Detail
Universal Declaration of Human Rights	Underpinning debates around the protection of human rights across the globe is the **UDHR. Articles 1 and 2** set out that "All beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and that "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion" respectively.[26] **Article 3** details that "Everyone has the right to life, liberty and the security of person." These articles are the foundation for the protection of Christians, and indeed other marginalized groups, against gender-specific violence and discrimination. **Article 18** recognizes the "freedom of thought, conscience and religion." The right to convert (to change religion or belief) is explicitly protected in this article, as is the right to manifest religion or belief through "teaching, practice, worship and observance." Article 18 is the cornerstone of work in the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) arena.
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights	Another key component of international human rights law is the **ICCPR**. While the UDHR sets out the fundamental human rights framework, it is not legally enforceable, whereas states that ratify the ICCPR are legally obliged to enact civil and political rights listed. **Article 18** mirrors the UDHR in establishing the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, while **Article 27** protects the rights of minorities, including religious minorities. This is relevant for countries where marginalized Christian communities are also minority populations. Article 27 recognizes the rights of minorities "to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language."[27] **Article 26** requires "effective protection against discrimination", including on the grounds of sex.
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women	CEDAW was designed to be an all-encompassing treaty to achieve substantial gender equality. For example, **Article 15** recognizes the equality of women before the law, while **Article 16(b)** recognizes the same right for men and women "to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent."[28] This protects against common Pressure Points such as forced marriage. The CEDAW treaty body has made subsequent recommendations in addition to monitoring the implementation of the Convention. **General recommendation 19** on violence against women is significant, as it acknowledges the seriousness of such violence, as well as recommending "that laws against family violence an abuse, rape, sexual assault and other gender-based violence give adequate protection to all women, and respect their integrity and dignity."[29] This is important, as many countries in the WWL lack legislation on areas such as marital rape and domestic violence, which often enables gender-specific religious persecution.[30] While it has been ratified by an impressive 189 countries, its effectiveness has been debated, with questions over initially weak enforcement mechanisms and the ability of states to make reservations upon key articles.[31] It also makes no mention of the role of religion or women marginalized for their religion or belief, while highlighting the particular challenges of other groups such as rural women in Article 14.

[26] Universal Declaration of Human Rights. UN General Assembly, 10 December 1948.
[27] International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. UN General Assembly, 16 December 1966.
[28] Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. UN General Assembly, 18 December 1979.
[29] General Recommendation 19. Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 11th session, 1992.
[30] For more information on which countries lack such legislation, see political and legal landscape sections of Full Country Dossiers, produced by WWR. 2023 Full Country Dossiers. Open Doors International. [password: freedom; accessed 16 February 2023].
[31] The CEDAW Effect: International Law's Impact on Women's Rights. Englehart, N.A. & Miller, M.K., Journal of Human Rights 13(1), 2014.; The Impact of States Parties' Reservation to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Keller, L.M., Michigan State Law Review, 2014.

Related treaties

The **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (CRC) can also be of relevance, providing protections such as the protection of the rights of children belonging to religious minorities "to profess and practice his or her own religion" in Article 30.[32]

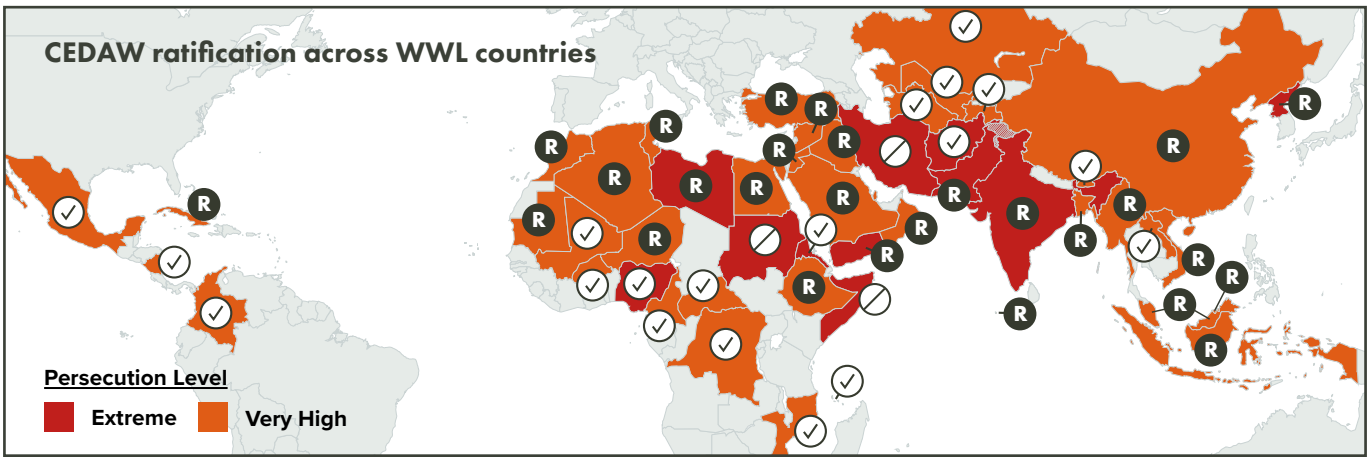
The Convention against Transnational Organized Crime is applicable in contexts where organized crime and corruption is one of the key persecution engines. In particular, the **Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children** is significant where trafficking is used as a form of GSRP.[33]

Given the forms of violence that especially target men in the public sphere, such as while imprisoned, the **Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment** can be relevant.[34]

The use of forced disappearances, prevalent particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, means the I**nternational Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance** can be applicable. For example, Article 5 codifies that "The widespread or systematic practice of enforced disappearance constitutes a crime against humanity as defined in applicable international law."[35]

Some of the contexts under study in the Top 50 WWL countries are currently experiencing conflict. International human rights law, as detailed above, is generally universally applicable. However, in contexts of armed conflict, international humanitarian law (also known as the law of war) comes into force. The most well-known element of international humanitarian law are the **Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols**, which establish fundamental principles such as the protection of civilians and those who can no longer fight. For example, **Article 27** of the Fourth Geneva Convention details the protection of women in conflict against "rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault."[36]

International criminal law, such as the **Rome Statute** of the International Criminal Court, may also be relevant in the most extreme cases of GSRP. For example **Article 6(d)** of the Rome Statute recognizes the crime of "Imposing measures to prevent births within the group" as a means of genocide (the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group").[37]



WWL 50 countries that have not ratified are:[38]
Iran, Somalia, Sudan

WWL 50 countries with reservations to one or more articles are:[39]
Algeria, Bangladesh, Brunei, China, Cuba, Egypt, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Morocco, Myanmar, Niger, North Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, Vietnam, Yemen

WWL 50 countries who have ratified without reservations:
Afghanistan, Bhutan, Burkina Faso, CAR, Cameroon, Colombia, Comoros, DRC, Eritrea, Kazakhstan, Laos, Mali, Mexico, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan

[32] Convention on the Rights of the Child. UN General Assembly, 20 November 1989.
[33] United Nations Convention against Transnational Organization and the Protocols Thereto.
[34] Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. UN General Assembly, 10 December 1984.
[35] International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance. UN General Assembly, 20 December 2006.
[36] Article 27 – Treatment I. General Observations. In Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War. International Committee of the Red Cross, 12 August 1949.
[37] Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. UN General Assembly, 17 July 1998.
[38] Status of Ratification: Interactive Dashboard. UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. [accessed 16 February 2023].
[39] Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. United Nations Treaty Collection. [accessed 17 February 2023].

2023 Middle East and North Africa (MENA) focus

Across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)[40] religious persecution is most commonly carried out by **governmental, family and community actors**. In some Middle Eastern countries, previously pivotal extremist groups such as the Islamic State (IS), while still operative, are now geographically limited to relatively small areas where they play active roles. The transition to post-conflict contexts in some countries does not necessarily represent a return to how things were before. Instead, an introduction of new challenges and a mutation of old ones enmesh to transform the environment of for Christian communities once again and present a new web of forces.[41]

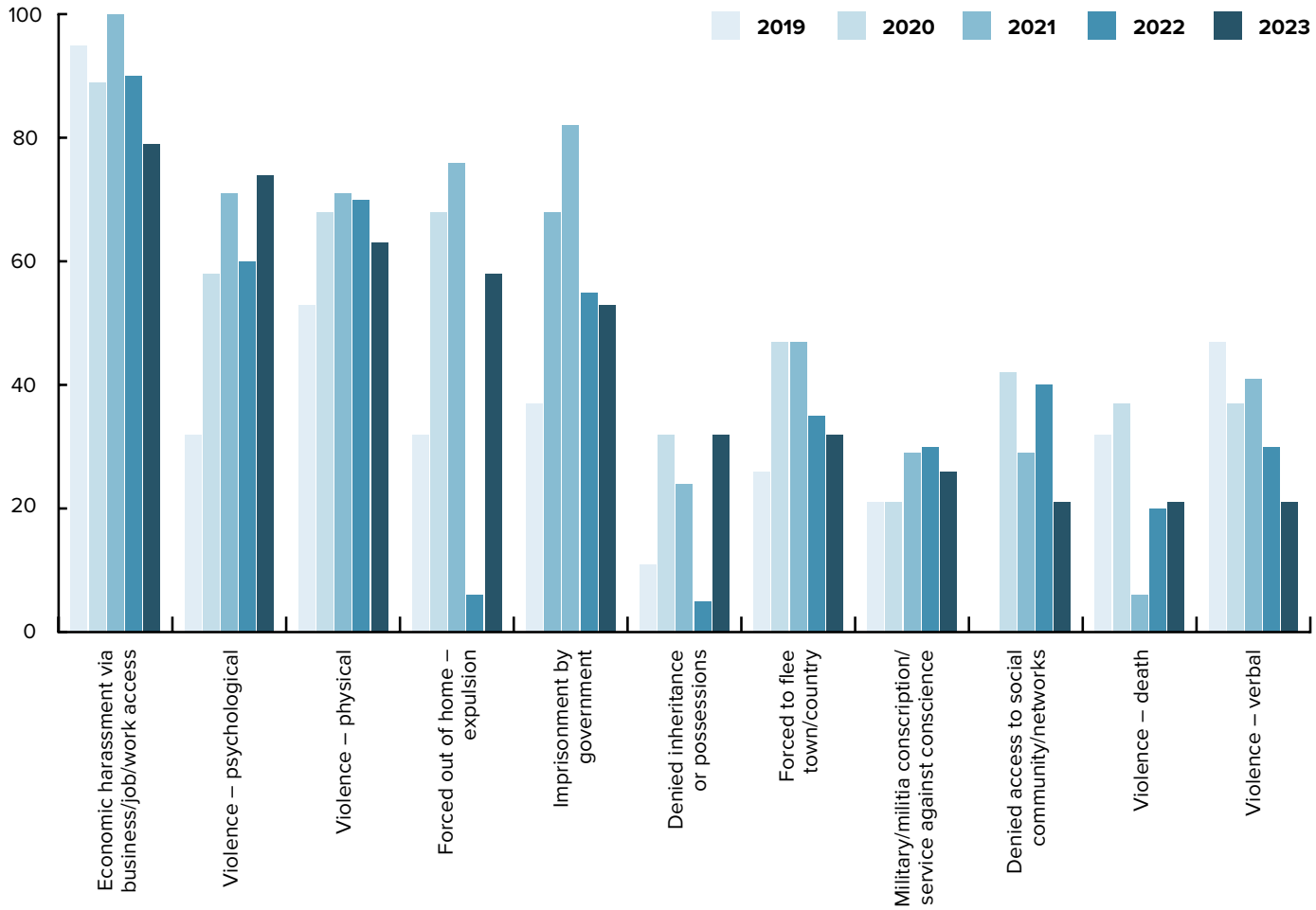
MENA FINDINGS: MEN

Male Christians in MENA generally have more freedoms than women, mainly due to societal gender expectations and partially due to gender-differentiated legal status in some countries. However, because men are more visible to government and community leaders, this can lead to a **greater risk of persecution in the public sphere**, such as losing their job or being pressured to attend religious gatherings.

The use of economic harassment against Christian men in MENA has been a consistent finding of GSRP reports over six years.[43] **Work related harassment is the most frequently mentioned Pressure Point for Christian men across MENA countries**. Often this is the threat of, or actual removal from their job. It can also be the denial of business permits or future promotion. Although men typically face a lower breadth of Pressure Points than women in different spheres of life, the exception is the economic sphere, where men are at more risk of experiencing economic related Pressure Points than women. In part, this may be due to gendered socio-economic dynamics, whereby proportionally there are more men in the workplace than women.

Male Christians with a Muslim background can face dismissal from their job if their conversion becomes known. Most frequently, they will face abuse and rejection from their

Top Male Pressure Points over 5 years[42]



[40] See Appendix C on countries under study.
[41] See for example: Fostering reconciliation through historical moral exemplars in a postconflict society. Čehajić-Clancy, S. & Bilewicz, M., Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology 23(3), 2017.; Security in post-conflict contexts: What counts as progress and what drives it? Valters, C. et al., Development Progress Working Paper 04, April 2014.
[42] These figures are taken from the MENA countries in the top 76 WWL countries. The number of countries under study varies slightly year to year depending on the level of persecution in each country. The percentage given is the percentage of countries under study in that particular year: 2023, 19 countries under study, listed in Appendix C. 2022, 20 countries studied. 2021, 17 countries studied. 2020 and 2019, 19 countries studied.
[43] Economic harassment via business/job/work access has been the Pressure Point recorded in the most number of MENA countries consistently across the past six years.



Pastor Chandrakumar's church was stormed by Hindu extremists in India. He was beaten and falsely imprisoned for weeks before finally being released.

family, such as being forced out of the home. This is explored in further depth in MENA FOCUS: Christians with a Muslim background (page 18).

Since men in MENA are commonly expected to provide financially for their families, **any harassment that severely restricts or removes wages can have a significant knock-on impact on a whole family**. This can also impact men psychologically; one regional expert commented on the feelings of "inferiority" that can stem from persecution that targets a man's ability to earn.

> 15 countries in MENA record instances of economic harassment via business/job/work access

This contributes to the range of psychological pressures Christian men face in MENA because of their faith. GSRP analysis of the prevalence of psychological violence reveals it to be the most wide-reaching aspect of religious persecution for men in the region. Two of the most common forms of psychological pressure are being **pressured into attending Islamic prayers and receiving death threats**. This is not a minor element when one considers specific examples: a local church leader in Turkey regularly hears threats as he walks the streets, such as "you are a dead man walking." Christian men with a Muslim background can also face psychological abuse from their families, often alongside physical abuse.

The threat of violence for Christian men in MENA is not an unfounded one, whether the driver of that violence be the state or the domestic sphere. Analysis of prevalence places physical violence slightly higher than economic harassment in the region, meaning Christian men and boys in MENA are marginally more liable to experience physical violence than economic harassment.

Christian men are more likely to be imprisoned, interrogated or threatened by the government, especially if they occupy a more conspicuous position in countries where the church plays a visible role, such as a church leader in a country such as Egypt or Iraq. In other countries, such as Qatar or Saudi Arabia, the churches ministering to Christians with a Muslim background will have to operate underground. Interrogation can be used not only to discover information about church activities, but also as a form of intimidation and pressure against individuals and communities.

Imprisonment is the next step of escalation, and **men can face continued interrogations, beatings and even threats of sexual violence alongside their incarceration**. In recent years, some places such as Iran have seen a decline in gender-specific imprisonment, as more women step into church leadership and the government is increasingly willing to imprison both men and women.

In comparison with other regions, **the experience of religious persecution for Christian men in MENA is concentrated primarily on four Pressure Points** which are: economic harassment, psychological violence, physical violence and government imprisonment. This contrasts to the other regions where religious persecution focuses on a variety of Pressure Points. This means that for Christian men in MENA, religious persecution is more synonymous with economic harassment, psychological violence, physical violence, and imprisonment than in any other region.

MENA FINDINGS: WOMEN

Social conventions, familial expectations and legal restrictions combine in MENA to encircle Christian women in a **web of forces pressuring conformity to religious and gender norms. Generally, women face a greater breadth of Pressure Points than men, reflecting the complexity of persecution** that they face. When tabulating the Pressure Points characteristically experienced by Christians of each gender from any background in MENA, there is nearly a four-point difference between men and women in MENA (men average 5.4 Pressure Points, whereas women average 9.1) signaling the multiplicity of persecution sources for women and girls in all spheres of life and via multiple actors. Complex persecution across multiple spheres of life can become all-encompassing, shrinking the space that Christian women have to live in.

Religious persecution in the region is **layered with a myriad of conflict and post-conflict dynamics, economic inequalities and the legacy of Covid-19.** This can intensify the drivers of and opportunities for persecution, although occasionally can also provide distraction from religiously motivated discrimination and violence.

Sexual violence is the Pressure Point with the highest relative risk[44] in the region, reflecting the **pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault against Christian women**. Religiously targeted violence, especially sexual violence, took extreme forms such as sexual slavery when IS controlled extensive territory in the Middle East.[45] Although much of this has abated, the ramifications, such as ongoing displacement and psychological trauma, of the years of IS abuse continue to reverberate. As of February 2023, armed groups still pose a threat in MENA countries such as Yemen, some regions of Syria and Iraq, and Libya.[46] Sexual violence continues to be a risk from community actors in many countries; sexual violence in conflict is not manufactured out of a vacuum, but instead can extend or intensify the everyday female experience of violence.[47]

> Sexual violence was recorded in all but one of the countries under study in the MENA region

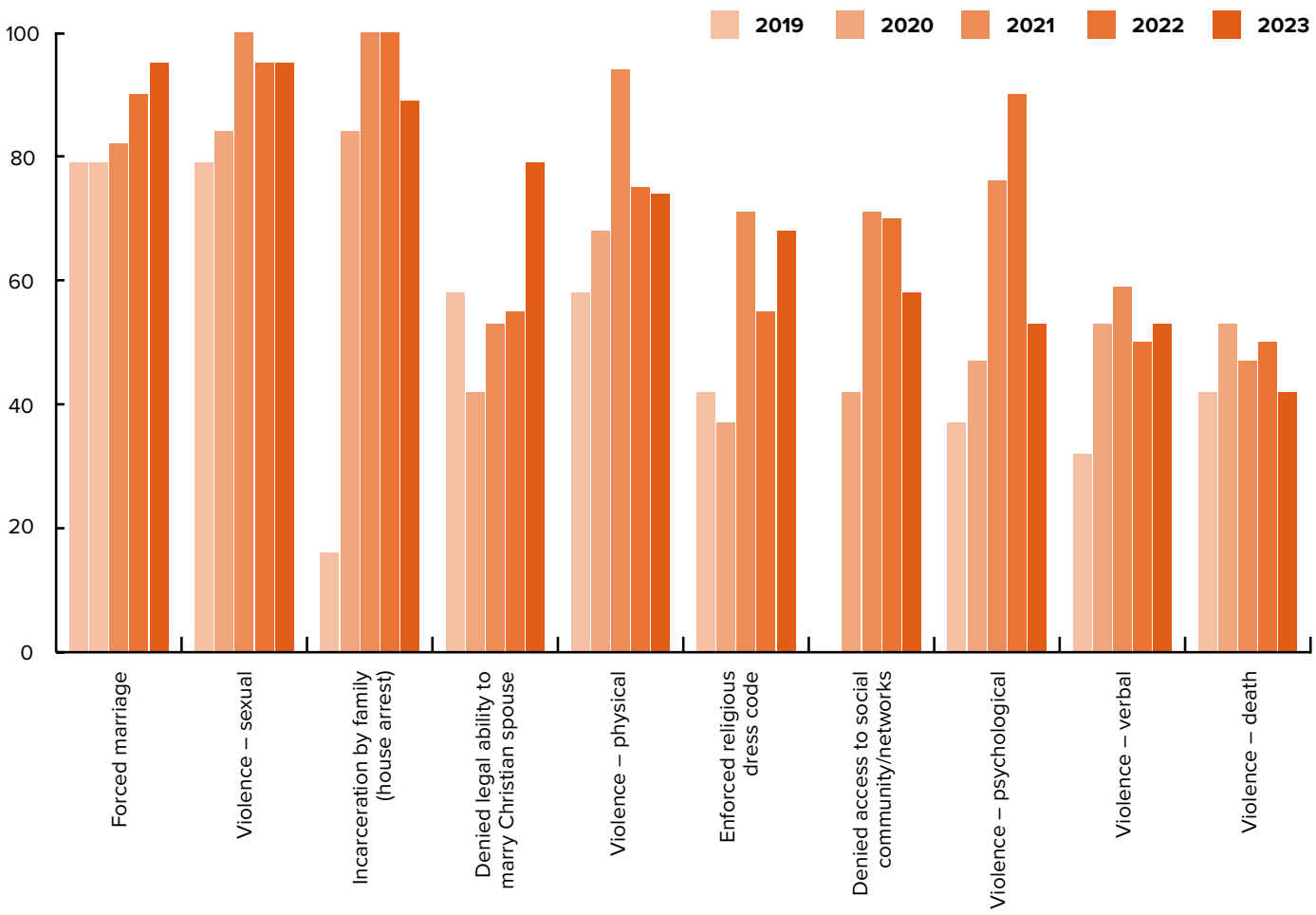
The societal and legal context can protract the consequences of sexual violence, and extend well beyond the person initially affected. For example, in Iraq, "there is a widespread fear among Christian women of all backgrounds of rape and other forms of violence, as rape in Iraq will not be prosecuted if the rapist marries the women he has violated." A WWR analyst continues, "To restore family honor, women, including Christians, may be forced to marry their attacker. The children born of rape (and/or this marriage) will be officially registered as Muslim." MENA is the worst performing region for legal reforms relating to marriage, according to the World Bank and the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security.[48]



Ferial lived in Aleppo when war broke out in Syria. She now lives elsewhere, and teaches at a Centre of Hope based at a Nazarene Church where she and her family received vital aid.

[44] Please see Methodology for the distinction regarding Relative Risk levels.
[45] Slavery: The ISIS Rules. Roth, K., Human Rights Watch, 5 September 2015.
[46] CrisisWatch: Middle East & North Africa. International Crisis Group. [accessed 17 February 2023].
[47] The fetishization of sexual violence in international security. Meger, S., International Studies Quarterly 60(1), 2016.
[48] Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/2022: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security & Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2021.; Marriage: Assessing legal constraints related to marriage and divorce. World Bank: Women Business and the Law. [accessed 16 February 2023].

Top Female Pressure Points over 5 years[49,50]



Enforced religious dress codes are widespread in a majority of the MENA countries. While the severity of this pressure is relatively low, it is one of the most prevalent pressures across the region. Religious dress codes can also **be a visual representation of attempts to enforce female conformity to radical forms of religious power**. For example, in Iran, the widespread protests triggered by the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2022 reject not only a hijab law enforced by the Iranian morality police, but also a religious regime that imprisons dissenters and co-opts "women's bodies as symbols of political ideology."[51]

Latent misogyny underpins and connects much of the violence and discrimination that women and girls face in the region. For example, women's dress can be **interrelated with their experience of violence**. In Islamist-held areas of Syria, such as Idlib, a regional expert describes how Christian women "have to completely cover themselves and disappear from the public space for fear of violence." Thus, **restrictions over what women wear can be connected to wider insecurity**, and demonstrates the complexity of a seemingly simple act – getting dressed.

Forced marriage and incarceration by family had high correlation levels with Christian women from a Muslim background. This is explored more in MENA: Christians with a Muslim background (page 18).



Sahar, a Christian from Iran. Read more of her story on page 19.

[49] See Appendix C on countries under study.
[50] In 2019, Pressure Point definitions were slightly different and didn't include *Denied access to social community/networks*. A comparable Pressure Point in 2019 was *Shaming/shunning*, which was characteristic of 68% of MENA countries that year, and later included into the definition of *Denied access to social community/networks*.
[51] The veil in Iran has been an enduring symbol of patriarchal norms – but its use has changed depending on who is in power. Motlagh, A., The Conversation, 14 November 2022.

MENA FOCUS: DIGITAL PERSECUTION

While new technology can offer a welcome means to minority faith groups for accessing religious material and creating human connections for isolated believers, it can also **render already marginalized faith or belief communities even more vulnerable to human rights abuses by both state[52] and domestic actors.**

As widely reported in media, using digital methods of surveillance and movement monitoring to track the activities of citizens is a rapidly expanding state enterprise. The Chinese government has led many technological advancements in this area, and shared methods and technical resources with states in multiple other regions.[53] However, **the state does not monopolize the method of digital persecution**. In whichever sphere of life which World Watch Research studies (see Diagram 1), digital persecution is a means of religious persecution which extends the ability of perpetrators to monitor and control the activity of Christians.

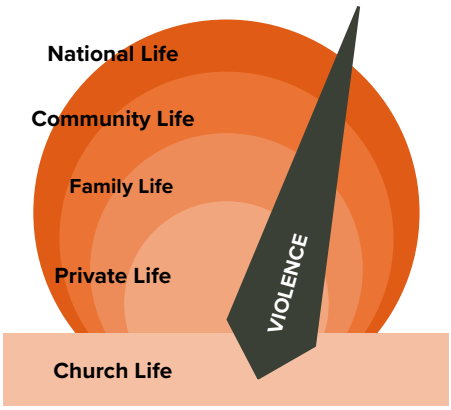
MENA is a region particularly identified within WWL research where the role of digital persecution is increasing at speed.[54] SRP methodology reveals that it is not only government actors who pose a threat; **family and community members play significant roles** in controlling digital access and monitoring activity in the lives of Christians.

Differences between state and private sphere use of digital control

The 2023 SRP research has brought clarity to a number of distinctions between the different characteristics of digital persecution when it is wielded in the different WWL spheres (See Diagram 1)[55]. Whereas state agents look to enforce adherence to government policies, family monitoring predominantly aims **to uphold familial expectations and reinforce status** through preventing unwanted associations with communities or teachings contrary to majority or traditional beliefs.

Within both spheres, digital surveillance can be a **means of discovering converts**, however, the retributive consequences in each sphere are markedly different. And while governments carry out broad surveillance across families, communities, regions and countries (with few gender specificities identified so far), **contextual gender dynamics produce a highly differentiated structure for the very nature of digital persecution by family members, which is especially detrimental to female Christians**.

Diagram 1



Four spheres of life relating to Christians as individuals and the church sphere of life looking at church communities – with violence as a cross-cutting phenomenon. Developed by Christop Sauer, IIRF.

Women and girls are both more vulnerable to this means of religious persecution than men and boys, and the consequences can be more severe for them because of their financial and social dependence, and their status within male controlled family structures. This does not mean that some Christian men and boys do not experience some digital persecution in the private sphere, but overall, it is to a lesser degree because of their more secure and privileged status socially and financially as males.

Across a variety of sectors in MENA societies, including in some Christian communities and families, women and girls can expect to have their phones checked by male family members.[56] So, **while surveillance of phones may not uniquely be a strategy of religious persecution, it can facilitate an opportunity for male family members to restrict a woman's freedom of religion or belief**. Moreover, the normalization of this restrictive practice means that when it is used for persecution purposes, **it blends in with the everyday digital surveillance and monitoring of women and girls within patriarchal structured families**.[57]

Researchers have begun to explore the **gendered interaction between digital technologies and domestic violence** outside of the context of religious persecution.[58] Studies have highlighted the range of digital tools available to abusers, including the exploitation of location services, spyware apps and hidden cameras in order to track and control (primarily female) victims.[59] Each of these digital technologies can be exploited to "exacerbate existing patterns of gendered violence and introduce new modes of abuse" with online harassment increasing in various forms.[60]

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[52] Digital Persecution: The New Frontier for Freedom of Religion or Belief. Open Doors UK & Ireland, 2022.
[53] State of Surveillance. Batke, J. & Ohlberg, M., ChinaFile, 30 October 2020.; The Worldwide Web of Chinese and Russian Information Controls. Weber, V., Open Technology Fund, 17 September 2019.
[54] The role of broader digital authoritarianism in the region is also identified by articles such as: The rise of digital authoritarianism in MENA. Jones, M.O., Chatham House, 7 November 2022.
[55] Original diagram: WWL Complete Methodology, October 2022, p. 30, originally developed by Prof. Christof Sauer.
[56] Digital monitoring by male family members can result in forms of online violence, see: Claiming and Reclaiming the Digital World as a Public Space: Experiences and insights from feminists in the Middle East and North Africa. Oxfam International, 25 November 2020.
[57] See for example: Jordan: Imprisoned women, stolen children: Policing sex, marriage and pregnancy in Jordan. Amnesty International, 23 October 2019; Qatar: Male Guardianship Severely Curtails Women's Rights. Human Rights Watch, 29 March 2021; Boxed In: Women and Saudi Arabia's Male Guardianship System. Human Rights Watch, 16 July 2016.
[58] See for example: Cyber-violence: digital abuse in the context of domestic violence. Al-Alosi, H., University of New South Wales Law Journal, 40(4), 2017; Digital coercive control: Insights from two landmark domestic violence studies. Harris, B.A. & Woodlock, D., The British Journal of Criminology, 59(3), 2019.
[59] Digital technologies and intimate partner violence: A qualitative analysis with multiple stakeholders. Freed, D., et al, Proceedings of the ACM on human-computer interaction, 1/CSCW, 2017.
[60] P. 610. Technology facilitated coercive control: Domestic violence and the competing roles of digital media platforms. Dragiewicz, M., et al., Feminist Media Studies, 18(4), 2018.

Controlling freedom of conscience in the digital space

The gender gap in digital access is a key factor in the dynamic. In low- and middle-income countries in MENA, **women are 16% less likely to use the mobile internet than men**, a gap which has remained relatively stable across the last five years.[61] This impacts their ability to access information, connect socially or live independently.

Access to online spaces can generally provide opportunities to **connect with other Christians and access Christian materials**. However, in Yemen, which already has one of the smallest number of Christians across MENA, women's cell phone usage is only at 53.5%, which is by far the lowest of the countries under study.[62]

As women's access to digital spaces slowly grows,[63] so do opportunities for primarily male perpetrators to monitor and control those newly created spaces in contexts of religious persecution. In cultures where women and girls have little privacy and men hold ultimate authority in the home, **the digital world is another sphere for domestic control and abuse**. In MENA countries such as Qatar,[64] male guardianship practices facilitate, even encourage digital control.

> "There is no privacy for the women or girls in this culture. The girl is expected to leave her phone at any time where anyone can see it. It needs to be fully transparent. Some husbands have a specific app to check the phone of the wife."
>
> **– Country expert talking about a North African country in the WWL 2022 reporting period**

Additionally, discovery of faith-related activity by families who are hostile to Christianity can be a persistent risk due to the exploitation of digital forms of monitoring and surveillance. Female secret believers may encounter **high levels of control of their digital lives via surveillance apps**, such as those designed for husbands to track and monitor their wives, and **weekly or daily checks of the phones of the female members of households**. For example, in Oman, it is very common for women and younger relatives to have their phones and social media regularly searched by family members. There have been reports that these invasive methods of monitoring have led to forms of self-censorship, with women choosing to limit or avoid Christian materials in the home out of fear of being discovered and the severe consequences that could follow.



A woman in full black abaya and veil in Saudi Arabia.

Severe reprisals for digital "disobedience"

Should their faith be discovered by their family or local community, converts to Christianity **risk losing access to digital resources**. Being denied access to Christian materials (both physical and digital) is a form of pressure more commonly attributed to women and girls in MENA. Denying access to digital Christian religious materials was found to be a threat in three MENA countries for women, the only region where this was recorded as such a risk.[65]

The complete removal of digital access as a form of persecution can often be **one of the most immediate measures taken upon discovery of a convert**, in order to sever their contact with the wider Christian community or online Christian resources. It is often the first step on a **continuum of isolation and punishment**. For example, in Saudi Arabia, where a system of male guardianship operates, a WWL country expert describes: "A female convert was beaten, locked in her room, verbally abused, and forced to marry a Muslim all because her family found Christian text messages on her phone."

> "It is expected that the family would take her phone and other way of communication from her as the first priority. The next thing would be that they would be moved to a different area and possibly be given in marriage to a religious person."
>
> **– A country expert describes the experience of a female Yemeni convert whose faith was discovered in the WWL 2022 reporting period**

In the most extreme cases, surveillance of digital activity can lead to **honor killings**.

On International Women's Day (8 March 2022), reports emerged of 20-year-old Maria from Iraqi-Kurdistan, who was killed by her uncle and brother. With tens of thousands of followers on social media, she had long been an advocate for women's rights and freedoms, having herself experienced forced marriage at the age of 12. The young woman was well known for her online activism, which together with her conversion to Christianity (and re-naming herself as Maria), is believed to have been a motivation for her killing.[66] Although the motivations are contested by the accused, this case demonstrates the **risks that an online presence can carry**.

[61] The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022. GSMA, 2022.
[62] Church numbers from WWL numbers, WWL 2023 Country religious statistics in WWL 2023 Compilation of main documents. Open Doors International, January 2023. [password: freedom] Combined with Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/2022: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security & Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2021.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Full Country Dossier: Qatar 2023. Open Doors International, 2023.
[65] Denied access to digital Christian religious materials was found in just one country for men (Comoros) (WWL top 50, 2023).
[66] Maria, 20, killed in Erbil by relatives for converting to Christianity. AsiaNews, 9 March 2022.

MENA FOCUS: CHRISTIANS WITH A MUSLIM BACKGROUND

Christians with a Muslim background are particularly vulnerable in MENA,[67] due to their legal status and exposure to familial and community attempts to either control or reject their conversion. For many men and women who see the weighty consequences of conversion to Christianity, **keeping their new faith a secret may seem like the only possible option**. In addition to suddenly falling prey to a host of newly relevant state restrictions on their lives, they are often the only person in their family who is a Christian – and many other nuclear and extended family members consider it their duty to encourage them to recant.

Christian women with a Muslim background

Christian women and girls also characteristically experience religious persecution through attempts to control their marital status by families, communities and governments. This control of marital status can take the form of forced divorce, restrictions due to legal status as a Muslim and forced marriage.

Male and female Christian converts exclusively face the risk of forced divorce; however, of those Christians with a Muslim background, predominantly women are affected due to gender-differentiated local laws and practices regarding divorce in family courts. Converts to Christianity also contend with still being registered as a Muslim, which can carry with it legally restricted marital options. Forced marriage can also be an immediate response to conversion; "a form of punishment and an attempt to restore them back to the Islamic religion," as a regional expert describes the situation in Egypt. While in several contexts, reported numbers of forced marriages and divorces may be low, **known cases function as an effective threat for women and girls in the region**.

> 93% of MENA countries reporting forced marriage specified that it is primarily a risk for Christian women with a Muslim background.

Controlling the movement of female Christians is also a particular risk for those who have converted from Islam. **Families use house arrest** as a punishment, often found alongside cases of physical domestic violence. It is also used to prevent women from meeting other Christians and bringing shame upon the family. 13 countries in the region reported this Pressure Point as being uniquely experienced by female Christians with a Muslim background.

> Women "are seen as more submissive within the local culture and more vulnerable. The family would try to keep them within the faith by isolating them from their Christian community and friends, and would also try to avoid bringing attention out of a feeling of shame."
>
> **– A regional expert describes the context in Yemen**

Christian men with a Muslim background

For men, rejection from families is more common. **Being forced out of the home is the highest ranking Pressure Point to be reported by a majority of countries as specific to male Christians with a Muslim background.** This can be accompanied by beatings and other signs of familial rejection, such as no longer receiving financial support.

With family systems of honor and shame governing many of the economic and social opportunities available to men, Christians with a Muslim background may **struggle to then establish themselves independently**. However, given the often-restrictive cultural norms placed on women and girls, living independently as a female in many contexts would be considered virtually impossible when seen alongside the comparative freedom for men.



Nadia is a Christian in the Arabian Peninsula, where it's a high risk for her to practice her faith.

[67] We recognize that there is a wide diversity of Christian population within and across the MENA region under study. Additionally, the legal situation is not identical. This section seeks to describe experiences that are common to many, while giving some examples to represent the diversity.

MENA FOCUS: SAHAR'S STORY

The struggle of female converts in the Muslim world



In MENA, a web of factors shapes the Christian experience of gender-specific religious persecution. Christians with a Muslim background, like Sahar, are particularly vulnerable.

As a new-believing Christian woman in Iran, Sahar faced a myriad of complex pressures that threatened to overwhelm her resolve to choose her own faith. Before she chose to change her religion, she seemingly had it all: a loving husband, two beautiful children, and no financial concerns. By choosing to walk away from Islam, Sahar knew that she would face the same dangers many new believing women in the Muslim world encounter and was acutely aware of what she could lose: her home, her husband, her children, her stability, and her dignity.

Sahar had no legal right to freedom of religion in Iran, and as a married woman, she would be subject to many means that her husband could employ to pressure her to renounce her new-found faith. The law would not provide sanctuary for the risks she faced domestically as there are no laws against domestic violence in Iran either.

Sahar's lack of legal rights in her marriage would become a means for her devout husband to pressure her to renounce Islam. "There was a realistic possibility of divorce," she explains, "and surely my children would have been taken away because of me being an ex-Muslim. They would not let me even see them, because all my rights would have been taken away as a convert." Her husband could easily divorce her which would mean Sahar would have to return to her parents' home under a vast burden of shame, losing her economic and social stability as well as her sense of dignity within the community.

The threat of being thrown out of the house has more perilous implications for women than men. While for men it is accepted to live with a roommate, for women this is considered an anomaly and immoral. Neighbors can create problems for women who live alone, such as male neighbors potentially pursuing sexual relationships with them.

As a woman, Sahar felt undervalued and uneasy. "I only realized where that came from later," she explains. "I had the luck to grow up in a family that valued boys and girls equally, but everything in society, every law, and every interaction pointed in a different direction. In Islamic-Iranian society women and girls are seen as less smart, less valuable, and not capable of making decisions."

When Sahar's husband discovered her new religion, he became furious and sent her away, as Sahar had feared. She found herself crying in the taxi towards her parents' home: "My pride was broken, I felt that everything was taken away from me. I didn't do anything wrong, I wasn't a criminal. I believed in Christ ...."

Sahar was unusually fortunate and when her husband kicked her out: she was shielded by her parents. Others are not so lucky.

Worse than the shame Sahar felt was the pain and worry over her children who she had to leave behind with her husband. Eventually, her husband invited her back into the house and the two slowly started rebuilding the relationship they had had before. "There was a lot of tension in our relationship because of my new faith; we had our ups and downs, but we both wanted to make it work."

Sahar's religious persecution experience didn't end there. Persecution facing Christian women doesn't only take place inside the home, there are also external threats, especially in a country such as Iran: Sahar was arrested and put into prison for her church activities.

Because of the threat of long imprisonment, Sahar and her husband and children left the country soon after she was released. They now live in Turkey, where Sahar works with recent female converts from a Muslim background. Many of them are in even more difficult situations than she once was.

In Iran, converting to any religion other than Islam comes with dangers for both genders: the dangers of imprisonment or losing your job are common for men and women. However, because of the vulnerable status of women inside Iran, they are extra vulnerable to an additional web of religious persecution forces due to their gender. The interconnected filaments capture prey and then progressively stifle new converts to ultimately renounce their faith – or face harsh consequences.

Regional Analysis

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Christians living in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) are at risk of the most violent forms of persecution for their faith. **Immolation, beheading, and lapidations are among the most common ways Christian men are summarily executed**, owing largely to the weak rule of law and acute socio-political discordance across the region.

Christian women, the majority of whom are equally predisposed to similar degrees of brutality[68] face in addition, **distinct forms of bodily violence**, including rape, forced marriages, and sexual slavery.

KEY FINDING #3:

The most deadly-violent region for Christian men is Sub-Saharan Africa.

High poverty rates,[69] widespread crime and corruption, intense inter-communal conflict and chronic food insecurity are among a **plethora of exacerbating factors that contribute to the proliferation of violent Islamic militant groups and criminal networks**. These groups not only exploit these vulnerabilities along gender lines but depend on external factors to expand their radicalized Islamist ideology and radicalization networks. GSRP analysis shows that attacks on Christian communities by radicalized Islamists like Boko Haram and Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) contribute to the most violent patterns of gender-specific religious persecution.

Violent targeted attacks by armed militia are especially deadly for Christian men

Research by the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA) shows that **Christians are about 7.6 times more likely than Muslims to be killed by "terror groups", particularly in Northern Nigeria**.[70] While many Christians living in conflict affected areas often suffer as victims of collateral damage, **targeted attacks by armed militia are especially deadly for Christian men**.

When assessing deadly violence against **Christians, Pressure Point analysis showed that Christian men are disproportionately targeted as they are seen as the propagators of the Christian faith**. 23[71] of the Top WWL 50 countries globally recorded the occurrence or active risk of Christian-related deaths where men were particularly targeted, with 52% of those countries located in SSA.[72] This number is especially notable as it is three times the number of countries recording the same risk in MENA, and 2.4 times the number in Asia. Cases of Christian men killed for their faith in very high numbers were reported in 12 countries, especially in countries plagued with internal conflict like Nigeria, Mozambique, Central African Republic, and Somalia.

Christian men in Sudan can be additionally vulnerable to sexual violence, especially in the Darfur area where Janjaweed militias are active. A local priest in Cameroon disclosed that there can also be an economic layer to the violence, as when men are killed by Boko Haram militants it allows them to "plunder the villagers' belongings." Amid protracted conflicts, generally older men who cannot escape or be recruited into the ranks are reportedly at an increased risk of being killed.[73]

Christian men are also susceptible to forced radicalization and conscription. This is especially true for converts in Somalia who are "forced into radicalism", according to a regional expert. "Families forcefully send their young men, including converts, to Islamic rehabilitation centers to be trained as Al-Shabaab militia," the expert adds. Forced conscription and military service against conscience were present in 76% of the region, most notably in Eritrea, where mostly men and unmarried women face indefinite military service.[74]

Christian leaders caught in a violent web of forces

Church leaders – the majority of whom are male – **are often caught in a violent web of forces and face an increased likelihood of arbitrary arrests, imprisonments and fines**. Enabling this, the legal landscape of many Sub-Saharan African countries consists of a combination of multiple legal systems where the links between state and quasi-state or local actors are often blurred and open to abuse. In several cases, Christian leaders are detained on **charges of apostasy, proselytization, and espionage,** or on the pretext of sharing messages that contravene social cohesion. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for instance, a regional SSA expert explains that it is "risky for churches to criticize the instigators of persecution. For example, churches that attempt to criticize the government risk being shut down and having their leaders arrested. Furthermore, churches that try to speak against the actions of the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) expose themselves to suffering more violent attacks."

Pastors and Christian leaders often bear the brunt of attacks during intercommunal and inter-religious clashes which leaves them vulnerable to persecution from a multiplicity of actors. For example, pastors in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon are at risk of attacks from Boko Haram militants, and separatist and government forces. In the Central African Republic, some church leaders are often detained and tortured by rebel groups if suspected to be informants. In the eastern provinces of Ituri and North Kivu of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, wearing Christian symbols such as a cross, rosary, etc., is known to provoke deadly attacks, particularly against Christian clerics.

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[68] Student in Nigeria Murdered Over Blasphemy Allegation. Ewang, A., Human Rights Watch, 16 March 2022.
[69] Poverty rate by Country. World Population Review, 2023.
[70] Nigeria: Killings and abductions in the period 1 October 2019 - 30 September 2021. Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA), July 2022. In the meantime a new three year report on violence in Nigeria has been released. The latest information includes data up to September 2022 (published 17 February 2023).
[71] Those 23 countries are: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, India, Iraq, Libya, Mali, Mexico, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan. Syria, Vietnam.
[72] WWR indicates that actual occurrences (not including live risk).
[73] No One is Spared. Human Rights Watch, February 2022; drawing from analysis of 15 countries, nine of which are in Sub-Saharan Africa.
[74] Imprisoned church leaders in Eritrea desperately need your continuing prayers. Open Doors International, 7 October 2021.

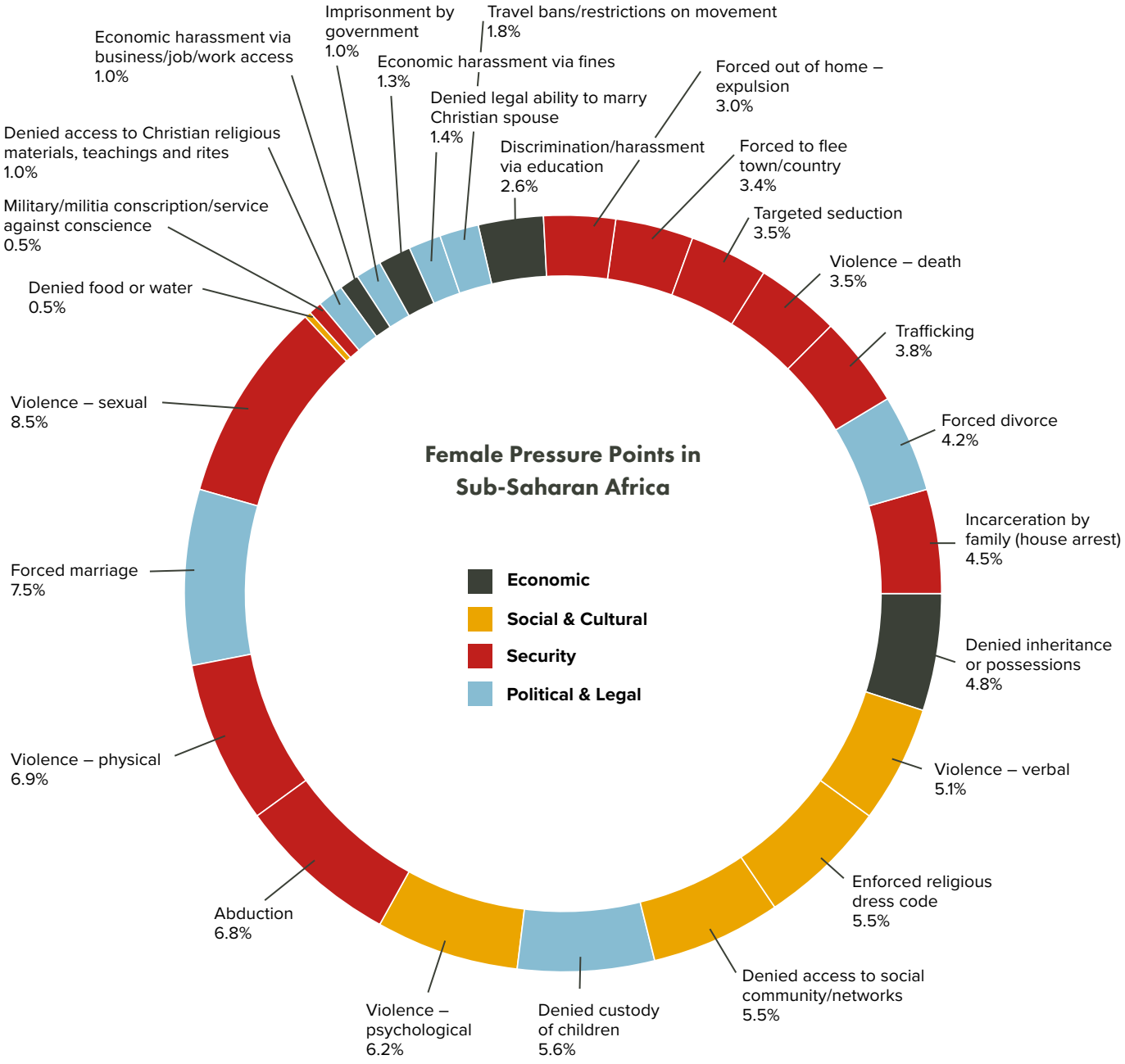
A dense web of Pressure Points encircles Christian women in Sub-Saharan Africa

The gender-specific nature of religious persecution for women in Sub-Saharan Africa is apparent in the **intensity and diversity of Pressure Points Christian women and girls face**. These weave an opaque web of strands within which the Christian woman may credibly fear being caught.

The extensive list of different means by which a Christian woman is likely to be persecuted exemplifies the depth and complexity of religious intolerance in the region (see the diagram below).

Christian women are frequently abducted for specific reasons, such as to be **"part of an organized program by Islamist militants to breed its next generation of fighters,"** as shared by an expert on Niger in the WWL 2022 reporting period. In addition, women and girls have been known to be used as human shields by extremists. An expert on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) affirms that "the persecutors sometimes put women (sometimes pregnant) and small girls in front, knowing that they cannot be easily shot."

According to a local source in Nigeria, the **number of Christians raped is usually closely tied to the number of Christian women abducted**. Studies conducted by ORFA show that Christians are about 6.0 times more likely than Muslims to be abducted by "terror groups," particularly in Northern Nigeria.[75] Christian women and girls are known to be targeted as "war trophies" by the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) rebels in the DRC.



[75] Nigeria: Killings and abductions in the period 1 October 2019 - 30 September 2021. Observatory of Religious Freedom in Africa (ORFA), July 2022. In the meantime a new three year report on violence in Nigeria has been released. The latest information includes data up to September 2022 (published 17 February 2023).

Legislative gaps are also exploited for the religious persecution of women at schools and workplaces as they are not able to access certain positions or even basic education without complying with the Islamic attire. Christian women living in Islam-dominated regions are particularly vulnerable to this occurrence. A source from Niger disclosed that Islamic militants put out warnings for women to wear hijabs in public places. "In some places, our girls are banned to go to market without wearing hijabs," the expert adds.

KEY FINDING #2:

Sub-Saharan Africa is the region where gender most shapes the experience of religious persecution for Christian women.

High poverty rates also contribute to the enduring practice of child marriage in the region. 16 of the top 20 countries with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage are Sub-Saharan African countries and the top three are Niger, Central African Republic, and Chad.[76]

In some SSA societies, **other cultural factors give rise to instances of religious persecution when Christians resist these practices**. For example, in a range of contexts, marriages for females can be preceded by female genital mutilation. **Women and girls who object to these rites may face severe repercussions, including extensive house arrest** by their family members. In north-eastern Chad, women are now liable for a fine of up to $39 known as "amchilini" for rejecting a marriage proposal.[77] Furthermore, in cases of conversion or non-compliance with cultural norms, including levirate and sororate marriages, **women can be stripped of their custodial rights in order to "prevent the spread of Christianity in the community**."

Overall, **converts from Islam to Christianity tend to suffer the most distinctive forms** of persecution at the hands of family members and members of their community. **House arrests, verbal and psychological abuse, disinheritance, and ostracization** are some of the top ways female converts are forced to recant their faith, according to WWL 2023 data. According to a Nigerien expert, young female converts are forcibly married to older radical sheiks in order to pressure them to return to Islam. By contrast, male converts in this context are at heightened risk of being physically assaulted, deprived of food and water, forced to flee and exiled from the community on account of their newfound faith in Christ.

These constant pressures on Christians in several regions usually **result in large-scale displacement of Christian communities**, either directly through expulsion by violent Islamic militants, or by strategic sabotage of their means of livelihood. As refugees or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), the vulnerabilities of Christian men and women are only further amplified.[78]



Zakia lives in a village where Christians are often targeted by Christian gangs in the Central African Republic. At 20 years old, she's already a widow.

[76] Top 20 countries with the highest prevalence rates of child marriage. Girls not Brides, 2023. Sixteen Sub-Saharan countries listed are: Niger, Central African Republic, Chad, Mali, Mozambique, Burkina Faso, South Sudan, Guinea, Somalia, Nigeria, Malawi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Uganda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sierra Leone.
[77] *Opinion*: Is Chad's Marriage Proposal Policy A Setback For Women's Emancipation? Williams, C. African News Agency, 18 August 2022.
[78] See The Church on the Run: IDP & Refugee Report. Open Doors International, 2022.

LATIN AMERICA

Christian leaders at odds with autocratic rule

Home to the largest Catholic population in the world, **delineating an accurate map of religious intolerance in a region** where Christians – a term more closely associated with Roman Catholics than Protestants and Evangelicals especially among indigenous communities[79] – are just as likely to be killed for their faith as they are for non-religious reasons due to high rates of crime and corruption is an **extremely complex task**.[80]

KEY FINDING #1:

Latin America is the region where Christian men and boys face the most multifaceted gender-specific persecution.

Weak domestic law enforcement across the region is enmeshed with gang wars, illicit drug trade, and human trafficking by criminal gangs like Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and Barrio 18 Sinaloa cartels and the ELN among others. This further complicates the determination of religious persecution in the multifaceted cultural, economic, and political Latin American landscapes, which are also engulfed in extreme levels of femicide.81 On the political front, amid widespread human rights violations and corruption, increasing tensions and growing polarization between Church and State expose Christians who oppose repressive government actions to heavy-handed interventions from the governments, typically by the use of paramilitary forces in mainly autocratic countries.

Christian men, especially **church leaders, bear a significant proportion of the hostilities** in this context. Their freedom of expression can be significantly restricted due to their influential status in society. GSRP analysis suggests that **Christian men are at a high risk of arbitrary arrests, abductions, forced exile, assassinations, and maltreatment while in detention, including physical torture and restricted access to food or basic healthcare.** For instance, in El Salvador, extremely overcrowded prison systems and gang violence within prisons contribute to massive human rights violations.[82]

Mario Davis Arias Rivera is one of several Christian leaders who died on the 6th of June 2022, shortly after being incarcerated after failing to receive proper medical care in El Salvador.[83] Due to the government's sustained emergency measures to tackle gangs in the country, Christian leaders like Mario involved in youth outreach and rehabilitation of ex-gang members who convert to Christianity **face the severest forms of opposition from both government officials and criminal gangs as an imprisoned Christian, due to the hardline policies applied by security officers**. Statistically, about 13% of reported cases of persecution of Christian men in the region are related to imprisonments and abductions, while death threats, physical violence, restrictions on movement, and extortion accounts for over 30% of cases.

Furthermore, local and state authorities' implementation of a fully autonomous indigenous jurisdiction in countries like Colombia promotes the **perpetuation of violence and discrimination against converts from an indigenous background**. A Colombian expert explains: "[In] the territory understood as an ancestral space, uses and customs are general to all indigenous groups, which is traditionally animist. Any changes in their beliefs are taken as betraying their cultural identity and can have consequences such as pressure, ostracism, physical punishment, and expulsion among others." **Christian leaders, often falsely reported as inciters of rebellion, usually bear the brunt of reprisals** and are also forced to pay ''protection fees'' to enter similar territories and are impelled to obtain permission before carrying out any activities.

In light of these pressures, many **Christian men – particularly those blacklisted by the government or criminal organizations – have been forced to flee with their families**. Others face severe immigration restrictions and increased monitoring within the country. According to a regional expert, this form of persecution is commonplace in Cuba where the government tries to cut off communication between the targeted religious leader and other members of his church, **including ministries or external organizations that could draw attention to such infractions of religious freedom by blocking their phone lines, internet access, and electricity service.**

Across the Caribbean in Nicaragua, **priests have been known to be taken hostage inside churches and denied access to food and family members**. A Nicaraguan expert summarizes: "All possible obstacles are imposed because they not only want to harass the Church and the leaders [whom] they consider to be in opposition but also because the ultimate goal is to prevent the spread of the faith."

Reported persecution of Christian women is described as ancillary to that of men

At the community level and in areas where the rule of law is almost nonexistent, the level of economic exploitation and violence increases especially when Christian activities threaten large-scale drug trafficking networks and the recruitment of child soldiers, mostly adolescent men. In this context, **women and girls are also susceptible to forced conscription into the ranks of drug cartels to serve as drug running mules or for sexual enslavement**.

Daughters of Pastors who actively work in gang territory are **systematically targeted in order to compromise their perceived purity and secondarily, to dissuade the activities of their parents**. A regional expert reflecting on this issue in Honduras explains: "As in other countries with a high presence of organized crime such as El Salvador, Mexico or Colombia, the daughters of pastors or other religious leaders are at particular risk because gangs seek to blackmail or intimidate them by threatening their families so that they stop preaching against them or their activities. In this case [Honduras], [they do so] with threats to kidnap their daughters and force them to become sexual partners against their will or to be sold in the human-trafficking market." There were **5 reported cases of attempted rape and sexual harassment of daughters of pastors in Honduras** in the WWL 2023 reporting period.

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[79] Mexico: Full Country Dossier. Open Doors International, January 2023, p14.
[80] According to WWL 2023, the persecution engines in Latin America are: Colombia: Clan Oppression, Organized Crime and Corruption; Cuba: Communist and post-Communist oppression, Dictatorial paranoia; El Salvador: Organized Crime and Corruption; Honduras: Organized Crime and Corruption; Mexico: Clan Oppression, Organized Crime and Corruption; Nicaragua: Dictatorial Paranoia; Venezuela: Dictatorial Paranoia.
[81] See Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean, United Nations, [accessed February 2023].
[82] Hundreds of children packed in El Salvador's overcrowded prisons - rights group. Reuters, 27 January 2023.
[83] School principal and pastor detained under the emergency regime dies. Luna, J.B., El Salvador.com. 07 June 2022.

ASIA

With a diversity of socio-political factors across and within Asian sub-regions, GSRP dynamics can look very different from country to country. Before highlighting specific for each sub-region, it is worth noting a few commonalities for men and women across the 23 countries studied for Asia.[84]

Imprisonment and economic harassment are two of the top pressures facing men across the region, often playing into expectations of men to protect and financially provide for their families.

Amid differing local contexts, the **strategic use of sexual violence against Christian women and girls is a constant**. Characteristic of persecution in 78% of the Top 76 countries under study in the region, it is also the most prevalent female Pressure Point in Asia. This is despite significant obstacles in reporting such violations, including both **cultural perceptions of shame and a reluctance to act by authorities**. A Christian woman or girl may experience being silenced by convention, leaving her instead to psychologically, physically and emotionally process and deal with the aftermath of a traumatic event on her own.

Forced marriage is also a common tactic to force the conversion of women and girls in Asia, characteristic of 18 of the countries in the region.[85] While this is a violation in and of itself,[86] it is a strand of the religious persecution web which is **frequently entwined with a range of other abuses** such as house arrest and sexual violence.

Central Asia

GSRP dynamics remain consistent year after year in Central Asia, particularly in the former Soviet republics[87] with strong state and family structures.

The risk for Christian men of being interrogated and/or imprisoned by state actors is particularly high. This risk can be intensified if a man has converted to Christianity or is in a particularly visible role, such as church leader. In Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, Christians can be imprisoned for conscientiously objecting to mandatory military service for men on the basis of their faith.[88]

Christian men can also risk being forced out of their job or facing restrictions or boycotts of their own business. This can lead to some converts keeping their new beliefs a secret; a regional expert explains how in Kazakhstan, "converts in the countryside are under pressure … [and] some business owners keep their Christian beliefs a secret." **Fines issued by state agents are also particularly common** in Central Asian countries.

Christian women with a Muslim background can be at risk of forced marriage; generally, the father decides who their daughter will marry. In conservative regions of the countries under study, the risk of "bride-napping" (a combination of abduction and forced marriage) is a particular danger.

South and Southwest Asia

In South and Southwest Asia particularly, **forced marriage can also be associated with abduction and trafficking**. For example, in India millions of people are exploited for commercial sex, often with those from scheduled castes and tribes at particular risk.[89] Against this backdrop, Christian girls can be subject to forced marriage through premarital arrangements, kidnap and trafficking. South and Southwest Asian countries have some of the highest numbers and rate of modern slavery across Asia.[90]

The **risk of sexual violence** in this sub-region is also especially high, often used strategically to pressure conversion. The governments and courts often fail to acknowledge this issue, let alone take steps to address either specific cases or the broader legislative landscape. This then creates an environment of impunity for perpetrators.[91] The cultural impediment to reporting of powerful social ostracization in Bangladesh, for example, (discussed in Top pressures affecting Christian women and girls) further amplifies the environment of impunity for sexual violence.

While many countries in Asia are gradually making efforts to address gender inequality, **expectations around the dependence of women upon men have intensified in Afghanistan since the Taliban returned to power**.[92] The chaperone system can restrict the movement of women and girls, as well as what they wear in public. Moreover, as many Afghan men died during years of war, the lack of a male family member can exacerbate the vulnerability of female Christians to further abuse.[93]

Southeast Asia

The risk for Christian men of being interrogated and/or imprisoned by state actors is also high in Southeast Asia. A regional expert on Laos explains, "Since the main church leaders tend to be men, they are vulnerable to imprisonment, and often have to pay considerable amounts of money to ensure their release. The absence of the father and pastor, can have a devastating impact on families and churches."[94]

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[84] For the list of countries under study, see Appendix C.
[85] Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Russia, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.
[86] Art. 23(3), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. UN General Assembly, 16 December 1966.
[87] Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
[88] This has been highlighted as an area of concern by bodies such as the UN. See for example: CCPR/C/TJK/CO/3: Human Rights Committee: Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Tajikistan. UN OHCHR, 22 August 2019.
[89] 2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: India. US Department of State, 2022.
[90] The Global Slavery Index 2018. Walk Free Foundation, 2018.
[91] Particularly true of Pakistan, see: Panel chief rejects draft bill on forced conversion. Dawn, 14 October 2022.; Country Update: Pakistan. USCIRF, August 2022.
[92] Afghanistan's score in the WPS index has decreased 28% since 2017. Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/2022: Tracking sustainable peace through inclusion, justice, and security for women. Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security & Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2021. See also: How Can a Bird Fly On Only One Wing? Afghan women speak about life under the Islamic Emirate. Shapour, R. & Mirzada, R., Afghanistan Analysts Network, 22 November 2022.
[93] The lack of male protection under the chaperone system also has an economic impact on the nation as a whole, with both the restrictions on working women and the added time burden for older and younger male family members weakening the economy.
[94] A pastor was killed in Laos just after the close of the WWL 2023 reporting period. As of February 2023, pastors are now travelling in pairs, if they dare to carry out rural ministry in the first place.

While sexual violence is not used uniformly against female Christians in Southeast Asia, there have been especially severe cases in some countries. Speaking of the sexual violence conducted by the military in Myanmar, a regional expert explains that "women are afraid to speak out because of cultural sensitivity and it is considered a social taboo … [and] they are oppressed and silenced by the perpetuators of the crime." A WWL approximation of a minimum of 100 women are estimated to have been raped or sexually harassed for faith-based reasons in Myanmar in the 2023 reporting period.[95]

Women who convert to Christianity from majority religions, such as Buddhism, can also face being **forcibly divorced**. A regional expert on Vietnam explained that "Usually the grandparents pressure the non-believing spouse to divorce the Christian spouse. It is usually the husband that divorces the Christian wife … [and] without the divorce, the wife would be beaten and abused physically and mentally."

East and Northeast Asia

China and North Korea are among the countries where gender least shapes a Christian's experience of persecution. However, both countries record trafficking as affecting Christian women and girls, particularly notable given accounts of bride trafficking into China.[96]

Unsurprisingly, in **North Korea, the gender-specific religious persecution that does occur is extreme and violent**. For example, Christian women can face rape during detention or in forced labor camps by guards, justified by the perception that Christian prisoners are below the level of citizens, and therefore it is not a crime to abuse them.



A young girl in East India, where women and girls are most at risk of forced marriage, kidnap and trafficking.

[95] Read more in: Myanmar: Full Country Dossier. Open Doors International, December 2022.
[96] China's Bride Trafficking Problem. Barr, H., Human Rights Watch, 31 October 2019.

Conclusion & Implications

Persecution does not take place in a vacuum, separate from socio-cultural, political or economic considerations. World Watch Research studies engines and drivers of persecution[97] because there are powerful societal and state forces pressing on individuals' lives to influence human behavior. Gender biases are an additional societal force displaying the "brokenness" of humanity which has become a means of religious persecution. Gender-specific religious persecution reports itemize Pressure Points to study the very specific and personal ways that the engines and drivers of religious persecution wrap themselves in a constricting web around the life of an individual person.

A COMPLEX AND ACCUMULATING WEB OF FORCES

Exploring the details of gender-specific religious persecution is not easy for the linear thinker. Almost every Pressure Point has the potential to be made exponentially worse by interacting with other Pressure Points from multiple sectors of an individual's life. Each individual then exists within a household of other individuals, each member struggling within their own unique web of pressures. But these struggles do not simply sit side by side. Family members feel the weight of one another's burdens, and the cumulative, suffocating nature of these compound vulnerabilities can seem unbearable.

KEY FINDING #6:

Web of Forces: Combined, the impact of persecution's many pressures can overwhelm, entangle, and threaten the stability of Christian families.

Although *compound* is something of a technical term, it usefully denotes an augmentation beyond addition or even simple multiplication. It is a mathematical image to try to capture how **human rights violations not only overlap but interact** in complex dynamic systems within a person's life. Therefore - not merely accumulation but having the potential to become magnified exponentially.

Six years of GSRP research have shown that women and girls face more compounding factors. This is what is meant by the label "complex"[98] for the persecution which women and girls face. And the more factors there are in the compounding equation, the greater the risk of permanent damage to the individual. In this case, risk to life, or risk that they will simply not remain in their chosen faith.

Within families, each person's web of forces smothering their own faith is either shared and shouldered jointly, or it becomes a source of friction and begins to undermine the stability of the family.

This 2023 Gender Report highlights the **web of religious persecution ensnaring Christian men and women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region**. For women, it can leave them additionally vulnerable when given no personal space either digitally or in-person to express faith or meet fellow Christians. For female converts, it removes their agency to choose their domestic arrangements and intimate partners. This web is myriad in its filaments. For male converts to Christianity in MENA, they find themselves cut off from the family and societal safety, thwarted at every turn to establish themselves independently, even with their relatively advantaged male status.

WHY WORLD WATCH RESEARCH INVESTS IN SRP RESEARCH

Reporting makes visible the previously invisible – a vocation to which thousands of journalists and researchers dedicate their professional lives. Within WWR's global persecution perspective, six years of GSRP coding and reporting have brought to light the dynamics of religious persecution which had previously been hidden within the camouflaging gender prejudices and injustices of certain societies and legal systems.

The 2023 GSRP Country Rankings allow practitioners and advocates to see where Christian women's or Christian men's experience of religious persecution **is most shaped by gender**. These rankings reinforce the finding that **gender bias is not worse for men or worse for women, it is simply different**. But in both cases, it is deeply influential: for men in *Latin America* as for women in *Sub-Saharan Africa*.

The SRP reports are published in order to reveal a reality which was otherwise hidden amongst a complexity and layering of forces and practices. Research catalogues and synthesizes the experiences of millions of Christians in order to provide the information which then allows governments and civil society to act.

UNDOING ONE HARMFUL STRUCTURAL FILAMENT AT A TIME

Before ending the report with specific recommendations, it is worth mentioning the foundational necessity for government and civil society is to move beyond just *seeing* gender-specific aspects of religious persecution to *acknowledging* the double breach of human rights inherent in GSRP. Acknowledging injustice can lead to an understanding that change is needed and, therefore, action is required. Acknowledging prompts a taking up of responsibility within a scope of influence so that the situation is alleviated or discontinued.

Taking apart a web of persecuting forces requires a certain amount of patience, removing one harmful structural filament at a time. Practical needs such as providing shelter and addressing the damage of those who have been trapped may seem the obvious place to start. Socio-economic solutions are necessary for both genders' survival and are often the means of intervention that are matched to the gender-specific persecution facing Christian men and boys. However, strategically identifying the sources of GSRP is necessary for long-term, strategic impact.

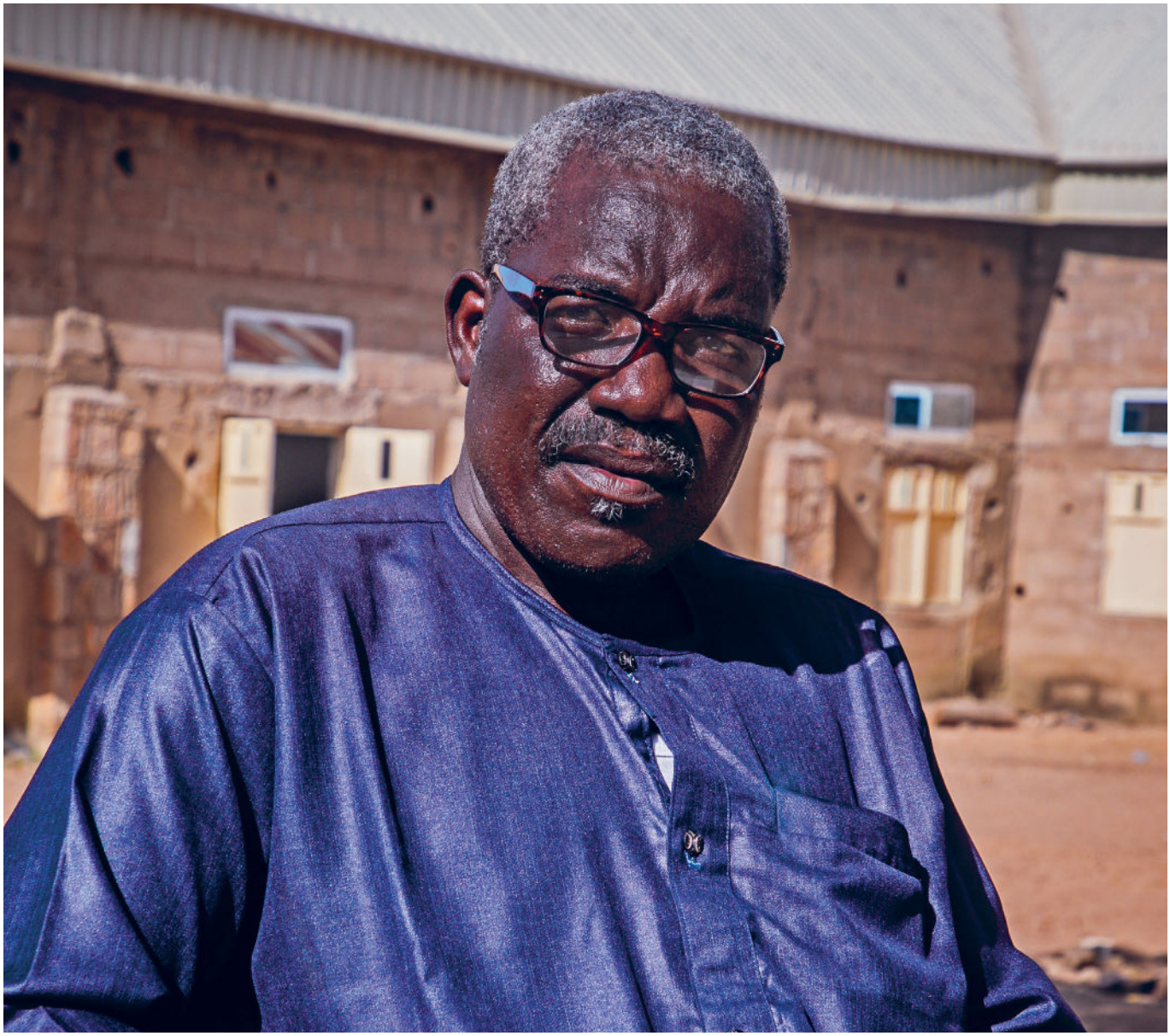
In order to address GSRP, both government and civil society need to be prepared to challenge ambient gender bias.

[97] See Complete WWL Methodology, Section 1.2, October 2022, pp.8-20.
[98] First reported in 2018 by WWR. Based on number of PPs and relative risk levels of those PPs. Men and boys also face severe persecution – but often it is more focused on a few PPs, not as large a web of PPs. Exception: men in Latin America.

Those who wish to challenge the influences or broader movements behind gender-specific religious persecution often find themselves speaking and acting against seemingly immovable or unchangeable force fields. As long as gender bias exists in a country, however, there will be a danger of its use against an unwanted religious population. Normalizing inequality or allowing culturally or religiously based inequalities to remain is not a neutral activity. If the religious population adheres to the same gender biases regarding what gives men and women in their community value, purpose and acceptance, the likelihood is that GSRP will remain effective.

There is an expectation that nations adopting CEDAW and other relevant treaties without significant reservations and who have legal frameworks of protection in line with international norms and standards, as outlined by UN Women,[99] will create places of refuge and means of recovery from sexual violence, forced marriage, abduction, trafficking, and domestic abuse. Faith communities which implement their counter-cultural beliefs in order to become restorative places which shelter in the midst of oppressive environments of blame, shame and control are a vital element for countering the effectiveness of GSRP. Together, they can render ineffective the web of forces which works so well against marginalized Christian communities only when woven together.

This report has recorded gender vulnerabilities for men and boys, women and girls, in the face of religious persecution. As the personal experiences of individuals become visible, the most effective ways to provide support for the Christian families and communities also becomes clearer. GSRP is ancient and unrelenting, and the combined strength of a resilient community can stand firmer against the forces that persecute. Each person might feel that alone their strength is as fragile as a single gossamer strand. Yet the tensile strength of combined fibers can positively bind together families and communities in belonging so that they can remain resilient in their faith, into the next generations, and remain in the countries they love.



Pastor Andrew from Nigeria has experienced heavy persecution with his church having been attacked by Boko Haram.

[99] See Global norms and standards: Ending violence against women. UN Women, 2023.

Recommendations

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

❶ 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)
- Include religion as a factor of vulnerability in any assessment made in planning and programming
- Include targeted programming and aid for women and girls who face compound vulnerabilities as members of minority faiths, recognizing the important role of such programming in countering violent extremism.

❷ Governments should:

- Ensure women and girls have equality before the law so that perpetrators of sexual violence, forced marriage and human trafficking are not treated with impunity
- Ratify and abide by the terms of the CEDAW, CRC and UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime
- In line with joint general recommendation no. 31 of CEDAW/general comment no. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC), repeal all legislation that condones, allows, or leads to harmful practices, 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.

❸ The Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, with input from the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), should carry out a study in order to:

- Enhance understanding of the compound vulnerability faced by women and girls from religious minorities
- Propose how the protection of women and girls, who are additionally vulnerable due to their adherence to a minority faith, can be enhanced, especially against the way sexual violence in conflict is being used against women and girls from religious minorities.

❹ The CEDAW Committee should issue a general recommendation that:

- Recognizes that women's rights and religious freedom are mutually reinforcing, not contradictory
- Encourages state parties to consider this interrelatedness between FoRB and women's rights
- Proposes measures to address the compound 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.

❺ The Global Church should:

- Openly acknowledge the extent and severity of violence against Christian women and girls, especially in communities under pressure for their faith
- Seek justice for women and girls facing any form of discrimination, persecution or violence, by empowering women, men, girls and boys to access justice, in order to hold perpetrators to account.

Methodology

SOURCES

For the 2023 gender-specific religious persecution (SRP) report, the SRP Unit of Open Doors World Watch Research (WWR) gathered and analyzed data using a mixed methods approach, comprised of both qualitative and quantitative elements. During the 2023 reporting period (October 1, 2021, to September 30, 2022), WWR monitored religious persecution dynamics in over 100 countries. SRP analysts studied data from the 76 countries where persecution is high, very high or extreme. This report primarily presents analysis of the top 50 countries on Open Doors' 2023 World Watch List (WWL). However, some regional findings additionally draw from countries that rank 51 – 76 in the pool of countries monitored by Open Doors (countries that score very high and high levels of persecution without making it onto the top 50 list), particularly in describing regional trends.

The data the SRP Unit studies comes from Open Doors' field staff and field contributors, external experts and WWR persecution analysts. As part of the data collection process, regionally based experts collected qualitative data from trauma specialists, church leaders, focus groups and experts. Additionally, the report offers information based on interviews with Christian men and women who have experienced violence for their faith. SRP specialists consolidated this research with desk research, drawing from publications by the media, UN and governmental institutions, academia and NGOs.

CHANGES IN WWL TOP 50 COUNTRIES

In the study of Gender SRP, the sample of 50 countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian is adjusted yearly based upon WWR persecution scores. In 2023, it includes Comoros and Nicaragua, whereas the 2022 WWL and correlated 2022 Gender SRP Report previously included Nepal and Kuwait.

METHOD

The SRP Unit analyzed the resulting WWL questionnaire data using a Pressure Point framework in order to reveal how often Christian men and women experience the various Pressure Points, Questionnaire data provides both quantitative incident reporting as well as qualitative descriptions of these incidents in specific contexts. The Pressure Point framework assesses the qualitative input and codes responses according to the 30 Pressure Points for gender (see Appendix A). This framework has been refined over the last six years of conducting the research and publishing the Gender SRP Report. The statistics allow researchers to observe and track overall trends in the patterns and dynamics of global religious persecution and discrimination.

HOW TO USE THIS REPORT:

For example, Pressure Point lists tell us what is characteristic of female-specific religious persecution. Tells us something about vulnerability and fears specific to being a woman or a girl in a hostile environment.

Regardless of the frequency of use of a Pressure Point within each country, Pressure Points are either categorized as "characteristic" or "non-characteristic" of female-specific or male-specific religious persecution. Pressure Points which affect both genders equally, without gender distinction, are not captured. Neither are Pressure Points which are gender-specific but lack a religion-specific element. Final SRP categorization of Pressure Points for each country are then reviewed for accuracy by WWR Analysts who are experts in each region.

In addition to this initial level of coding, Gender SRP researchers also captured per tactic, via qualitative descriptions, variations across countries in how this pressure is brought to bear in different contexts. Where the information was available, the researcher captured the frequency at which the Pressure Point was occurring, which age group was primarily affected, the religious background of victims, wider contextual information and severity level.

The scale used to measure frequency was:

Frequency level	Description
Unknown	Cited by respondents as a means of pressure or persecution, activity level unknown
Live risk, no known cases	Cited by respondents as an active threat that influences behavior, but no known cases in the 2023 reporting period
Isolated incident	A single case
Indication of occurrence, scale unknown	Cited by respondents as an active means of pressure or persecution, but undetermined number of incidents. Could be 0-50.
Several incidents	2-10 cases
Moderately widespread	11-50 cases
Widespread	50+ cases (and in several areas across the country)

Relative Risk	
Frequency level	**Weighted Value (risk level)**
Widespread	1.00
Moderately widespread	0.86
Several incidents	0.71
Indication of occurrence, scale unknown	0.57
Isolated incident	0.43
Live risk, no known cases	0.29
Unknown	0.14

Researchers then used the frequency level to assess the relative risk and cumulative risk of each Pressure Point. By assigning a weighted value to the frequency level, the frequency then informed the relative risk of a Pressure Point being used in a given country.

HOW TO USE THIS REPORT:

The GSRP Country Rankings show where gender most shapes the experience of religious persecution. It does not tell us where persecution is worst for women or for men, but where it most targets them as females or as males.

Finally, the relative risk (weighted value) of each Pressure Point is combined together with the relative risk value of other Pressure Points of each country to calculate the cumulative Pressure Point value of each country. Comparing the cumulative Pressure Point value of each country, for each gender, gave the GSRP Country Rankings.

The GSRP Country Rankings show where gender most shapes the experience. We know from the WWL 2023 data that the worst place in the world to be a Christian is North Korea. However, that is not where religious persecution is most shaped by gender. Gender-specific country ranking tell us, for instance, that gender most shapes the religious persecution facing Christian women in Nigeria.

Finally, the scale used to measure severity was:

Severity level	**Description**	**Example of Pressure Point in this severity level**
Low	Low impact to daily life	Enforced religious dress code
Moderate	Medium impact on daily life, causing moderate mental harm	Discrimination/harassment via education
Severe	Non-fatal, but significant physical or mental harm	Violence – physical
Very severe	Fatal to life, or extremely traumatic	Violence – death



Rose, a widow from Nigeria, and her children.

LIMITATIONS

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.

In particular, the use of the frequency and severity scale involved subjective interpretation. While questionnaire correspondents often gave a numerical estimate for forms of persecution, these were not given for every answer (and notably, not for the questions that specifically related to gender). Questionnaire contributors employed various terms to describe frequency, however it is recognized that their interpretation of these terms may have varied from the scale above.

Qualitative data reveals what the respondent considers to be important to report. Therefore, there is an element of perception of prevalence – rather than a factual basis of prevalence *as compared to* other Pressure Points. The relative risk level of each Pressure Point shows the extent to which a respondent feels the threat of a Pressure Point, observed its use, or hears of its use. This is often based on how often a respondent sees it happen, and the magnitude of the impact: how directly someone has threatened a respondent and their close contacts, or the stories respondents hear and their frequency of repetition. It also potentially reveals the presence of threatening actors – or the impunity with which a person could act against a respondent. Furthermore, the Pressure Points which are normalized in a society may blend in to such an extent that they are not reported as being notable. There is the risk that the resulting GSRP Country Rankings may reflect more about the gender lenses of those filling out the survey than the situation itself.

Year to year, there are some fluctuations in the capture of Pressure Points. These may be driven by trends in persecution, difficult contexts exacerbating gender SRP, the number of respondents and/or increases of gender awareness (or lack thereof). To draw substantiated conclusions from the data, a strictly numerical approach is avoided. Instead, SRP analysts take a holistic and balanced approach to the data set, recognizing the specific influences of shifts in data collection and using internal audit processes to confirm trend analysis.

DEFINITIONS

Persecution

There is no international, legal definition of persecution. Situations can be defined as persecution, where persons experience the denial of the rights listed in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, WWL methodology has opted for a theological rather than a sociological definition, "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.[100]

Gender equality

This term is used according to the definition provided by UN Women, namely, "Equality between women and men (gender equality): refers to the equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same, but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a women's issue but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centered development."[101]

Pressure Point

"Pressure Point" is the term used to refer to both the pressures and violence faced in the course of religious persecution. In WWL methodology, "pressure" usually denotes non-violent persecution experienced in all areas of a Christian's life and "violence" is defined as "the deprivation of physical freedom or as serious bodily or mental harm to Christians or serious damage to their property" (and related incidents), which can potentially occur in all areas of life.[102] Pressure Points are areas of particular sensitivity or vulnerability for men and women within a religious community. Researchers borrowed the term from the martial arts context, where a Pressure Point is a "point that, when pressure is applied, produces crippling pain." They are "used to exploit a weakness or vulnerability in the human body to gain an advantage over an opponent."[103] These Pressure Point categories provide a means to establish the frequency with which a particular form of pressure is associated with each gender.



Mr Kanmanirajah's family attend Zion Church in Sri Lanka, which came under attack by a suicide bomber on Easter Sunday, 2019.

[100] Complete WWL methodology, p.7.
[101] UN Women, *Concepts and Definitions* [Accessed 7 Feb 2022].
[102] Complete WWL methodology, p.29.
[103] Martial Arts Pressure Points: Medium Range, John Gahan, LCGI, 2017 [Accessed 4 Feb 2022].

2023 Gender SRP Appendix

APPENDIX A: PRESSURE POINT DEFINITIONS

The following table provides definitions and simplified definitions for the 30 Pressure Points (two with sub-categories) that are identified and analyzed in Open Doors' gender-specific persecution report.

Pressure Point	Definition	Gender	IDPR	Children
Abduction	The act of making a person go somewhere with you, especially using threats of violence.[104]	■	■	■
Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites	The denial of access to Christian religious material, such as Bibles, study notes and Christian symbols, teachings, such as from churches, youth groups, Sunday schools and Christian parents, and rites, such as baptism.	■	■	■
Denied access to social community/ networks	The denial of access to social community or networks.	■	■	■
Denied citizenship	The intentional act of denying or removing citizenship from nationals.	■	■	
Denied access to a Christian parent	The act of denying a child access to a Christian parent on a permanent or semi-permanent basis.		■	■
Denied communal resources	The intentional act of denying or removing access to communal resources, such as communal organizations, buildings or other public goods, services or programs.	■	■	■
Denied custody of children	The act of denying a person of the legal and/or physical custody of their child/children, or the right to have a relationship or direct contact with their child/children.	■	■	
Denied food or water	The act of deliberately denying another person of food of water.	■	■	■
Denied inheritance or possessions	Denying a person of their inheritance rights or their possessions.	■	■	■
Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse	The act of denying a person the legal right to marry a Christian spouse.	■	■	
Denied/restricted healthcare	Discrimination affecting users of health care services. It serves as a barrier to accessing health services, affects the quality of health services provided, and reinforces exclusion from society for both individuals and groups.[105]	■	■	■

[104] Abduction, Cambridge Dictionary [last accessed 10 June 2022].
[105] Adapted from the Joint United Nations statement on ending discrimination in health care settings, 2017 [last accessed 16 May 2022].

Pressure Point	Definition	Gender	IDPR	Children
Discrimination/ harassment via education	Distinguishing, excluding or limiting access to education. Specifically, by: a) depriving any person or group of persons of access to education of any type or at any level; (b) limiting any person or group of persons to education of an inferior standard; (c) establishing or maintaining separate educational systems or institutions for persons or groups of persons; or (d) by inflicting on any person or group of persons conditions which are incompatible with human dignity. [106]	■	■	■
Discrimination/ harassment via the asylum system	Discriminating against the asylum seeker by affecting their asylum status, and/or using the system to harass the asylum seeker.		■	
Economic harassment via business/job/ work access	Targeting or boycotting a business to its economic disadvantage, or distinguishing, excluding or limiting a person's access to work or jobs due to their Christian faith. Specifically, by: a) preventing Christians from obtaining or retaining gainful employment; (b) limiting any person or group of persons to working conditions of an inferior standard; (c) by inflicting on any person or group of persons conditions which are incompatible with human dignity; or d) forced labor, including subtle means such as accumulated debt, retention of identity papers or threats of denunciation to immigration authorities, but not extending to slavery.[107]	■	■	■
Economic harassment via fines	The act of disadvantaging another person through inappropriately applied fines.	■	■	
Enforced religious dress code	The act of forcing, or applying significant pressure on someone, to wear religious clothing.	■	■	■
False charges	Legal charges against a person that are unproven and untrue, made in the spirit of deliberateness or deceit.	■	■	
Forced divorce	The act of terminating a marriage or marital union without the consent of the spouse.	■		
Forced family separation	The act of forcing family members to be separated, for example by manipulating the use of resettlement schemes.		■	
Forced marriage	A marriage in which one party has not personally expressed their full, free and informed consent to the union.[108] This includes child marriage, or early marriage, where at least one of the parties is under 18 years of age. It also includes unannounced and disadvantageous polygamous marriage with the intent to subjugate for religious reasons.	■	■	■
Forced out of home – expulsion	The act of suddenly and forcibly expelling a person from the residence they have been living in, or applying such pressure that they feel they have no freedom to stay.	■	■	■
Forced to flee town/country	The act of suddenly and forcibly expelling a person from the town/country they have been living in, or applying such pressure that they feel that they have no choice to stay.	■	■	■

[106] Adapted from Article 1 of the Convention against Discrimination in Education, UNESCO, 1960 [last accessed 10 June 2022].
[107] Adapted from the International Labor Organization [last accessed 16 August 2022].
[108] Child, early and forced marriage, including in humanitarian settings, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [last accessed 10 June 2022].

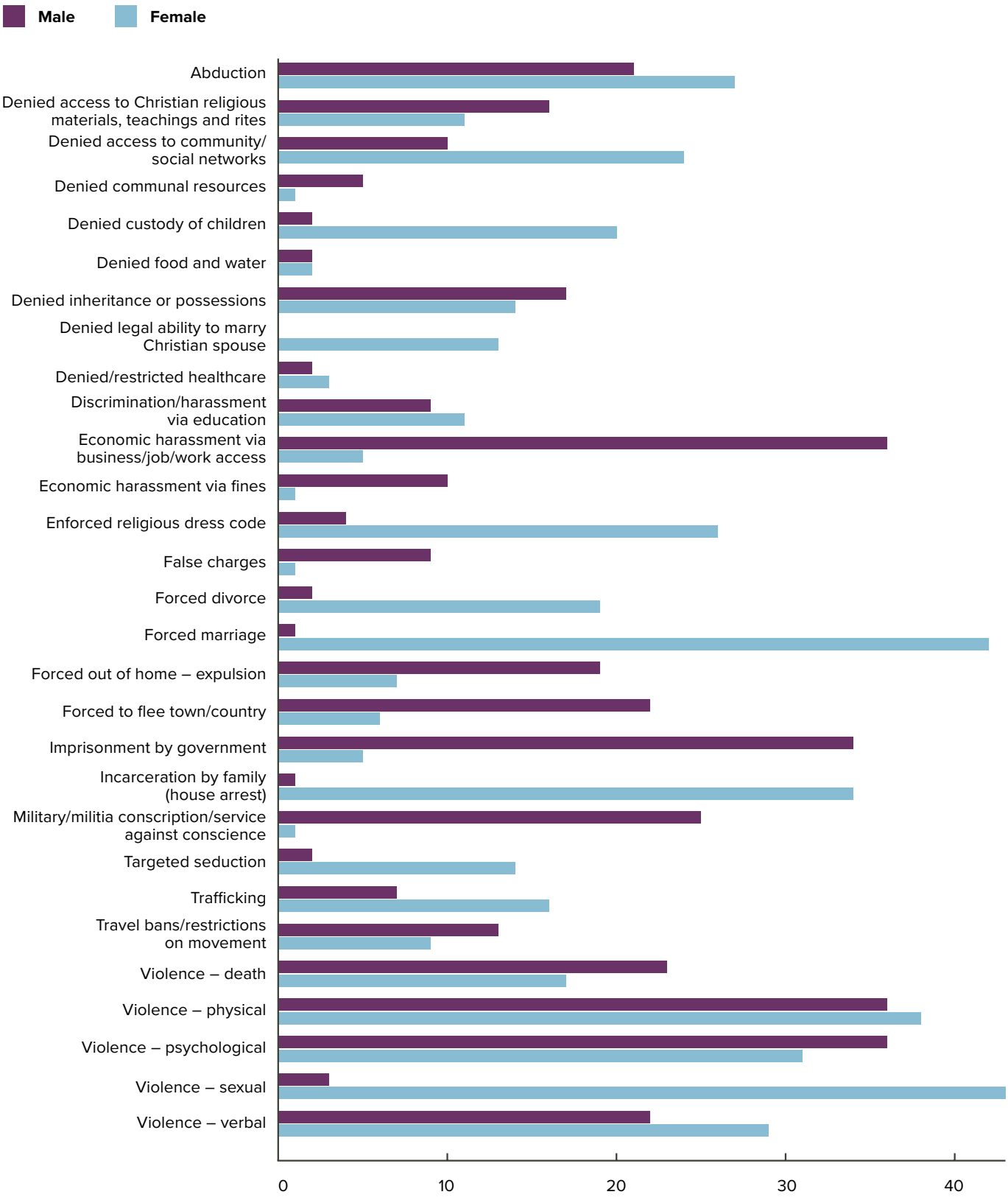
Pressure Point	Definition	Gender	IDPR	Children
Incarceration by family (house arrest)	The obligation upon an individual that she/he be forbidden to leave his or her place of residence except for limited, specified circumstances.[109]	■	■	■
Imprisonment by government	The act of being imprisoned in a prison, or place used as a prison, by a government body or agent.[110]	■	■	■
Military/militia conscription/ service against conscience	Serving in the military forces of a country against a person's conscience, being ill-treated (denied Freedom of Religious Belief) in the service of the military, or being forced to carry out specific acts in military service that are against a person's conscience.	■	■	■
Refoulement (forced return)	The practice of forcing refugees or asylum seekers to return to a country in which they are liable to be subjected to persecution.		■	
Targeted Seduction	The act of seducing someone (here with a sexual connotation) with the intent purpose of leading them away from their Christian faith.	■	■	■
Trafficking **a. Sexual exploitation not explicitly mentioned** **b. Sexual exploitation explicitly mentioned.**	Trafficking: The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploiting a person.[111]	■	■	■
Travel bans/ restrictions on movement	Preventing a person from travelling somewhere, or restricting their movement against their will.	■	■	■
Violence – death	The cause of loss of life.	■	■	■
Violence – physical (including torture)	Bodily harm inflicted by one person on another person.[112] Researchers limit the designation of this Pressure Point to instances which clearly indicate instances of physical harm (such as beatings/acts of torture) but which do not result in death. Instances of sexual violence are excluded.	■	■	■
Violence – physical (including torture)	Any intentional conduct that seriously impairs another person's psychological integrity through coercion or threats.[113]	■	■	■
Violence – sexual **a. Rape not explicitly mentioned** **b. Rape explicitly mentioned**	Any sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationships to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.[114]	■	■	■
Violence – verbal (including harassment and insults)	Harsh and insulting language directed at a person, intended to cause them emotional harm.[115]	■	■	■

[109] Adapted from Duhaime's Legal Dictionary [last accessed 27 November 2019].
[110] Adapted from the Cambridge Dictionary [last accessed 10 June 2022].
[111] Article 3 of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons [last accessed 10 June 2022].
[112] Adapted from the Law Dictionary [last accessed 1 September 2022].
[113] European Institute for Gender Equality [last accessed 1 September 2022].
[114] Adapted from the World Health Organization, Sexual violence/Definition [last accessed 1 September 2022].
[115] Adapted from the Merriam-Webster Dictionary [last accessed 10 June 2022.]

APPENDIX B: 2023 GLOBAL PRESSURE POINTS

1) Global: 2023 GSRP Pressure Points for Top 50 WWL countries

The full list of 30 Pressure Points and a visual representation of the distribution of Pressure Points for male and female Christians is presented in the bar chart below. This chart illustrates the number of WWL top 50 countries in which a particular Pressure Point is recorded for males or females. In some countries, a Pressure Point is recorded for both genders. This is due to an explicitly different religious discrimination or persecution dynamic being associated with the application of pressure for each gender.[116]



[116] A list of Pressure Points with their associated definitions can be found in Appendix A. Further discussion of Pressure Points can also be found in the Methodology.

2) Global: 2023-2019 Male and Female Pressure Points

The top 10 Pressure Points for male and female Christians for 2023 are ranked below, with comparisons provided for the percentage scores since 2019. The scores refer to the percentage of World Watch List (WWL) top 50 countries where the Pressure Point is recorded as characteristic of the experience of religious persecution for the gender.

Global: Male Top 10 Pressure Points table for Top 50 WWL countries

2023 Rank	Pressure Point	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019 Augmented
1	Economic harassment via business/job/work access	72%	66%	74%	66%	72%
1	Violence – physical	72%	80%	86%	82%	74%
1	Violence – psychological	72%	68%	66%	56%	44%
4	Imprisonment by government	68%	64%	74%	66%	52%
5	Military/militia conscription/ service against conscience	50%	58%	56%	40%	36%
6	Violence – death	46%	38%	48%	38%	32%
7	Forced to flee town/ country	44%	34%	38%	40%	20%
7	Violence – verbal	44%	46%	44%	38%	68%
9	Abduction	42%	32%	34%	34%	22%
10	Forced out of home – expulsion	38%	26%	38%	34%	30%

Global: Female Top 10 Pressure Points table for Top 50 WWL countries

2023 Rank	Pressure Point	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019 Augmented
1	Violence – sexual	86%	90%	86%	84%	88%
2	Forced marriage	84%	88%	90%	84%	76%
3	Violence – physical	76%	78%	84%	64%	62%
4	Incarceration by family (house arrest)	68%	66%	70%	60%	62%
5	Violence – psychological	62%	78%	74%	40%	38%
6	Violence – verbal	58%	54%	56%	46%	52%
7	Abduction	54%	62%	58%	50%	34%
8	Enforced religious dress code	52%	42%	40%	30%	28%
9	Denied access to social community/networks	48%	52%	52%	36%	58%
10	Denied custody of children	40%	44%	42%	34%	46%

3) Global: PREST gender SRP concentration radar graph

Political and legal, Religious, Economic, Security, Social and cultural and Technological (PREST) categories are used by Open Doors World Watch Research (WWR) to understand landscapes of persecution. Each Gender SRP Pressure Point is correlated with its appropriate PREST category (see table below).

The PREST Gender SRP radar graph represents the spread of Pressure Points impacting Christian women versus Christian men in the WWL 2023 Top 50 countries.



This graph demonstrates the concentration of Pressure Points facing Christian men, predominately economic and security concerns. In contrast, Christian women face a wider spread of Pressure Points, especially into the socio-cultural areas and related to legal inequalities.

PREST categorization of Pressure Points

Economic	Political & Legal	Security	Social & Cultural
Denied inheritance or possessions	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites	Abduction	Denied access to social community/networks
Discrimination/harassment via education	Denied citizenship	Forced out of home – expulsion	Denied communal resources
Economic harassment via business/job/work access	Denied custody of children	Forced to flee town/country	Denied food or water
Economic harassment via fines	Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse	Incarceration by family (house arrest)	Denied/restricted healthcare
	False charges	Military/militia conscription/ service against conscience	Enforced religious dress code
	Forced divorce	Targeted seduction	Violence – psychological
	Forced marriage	Trafficking	Violence – verbal
	Imprisonment by government	Violence – death	
	Travel bans/restrictions on movement	Violence – physical	
		Violence – sexual	

There are no Pressure Points assigned to Religious or Technological categories; all the Pressure Points can be considered religious as they are used for the purposes of religious persecution. In the same way, here is no Pressure Point for 'forced conversion' since it is a goal of religious persecution, not a means of persecution.

There is currently no Pressure Points referring exclusively to technology as a means of religious persecution, however, the 2023 GSRP Key Findings argue in favor of adding a Pressure Point related to 'digital control' in the future.

APPENDIX C: REGIONAL CATEGORIZATION: WWL TOP 76 COUNTRIES

In 2023 there were 76 countries recorded by WWL as experiencing high, very high or extremely high levels of persecution.[117] The table below lists how these 76 countries are categorized regionally within WWR.

Asia	Latin America	Middle East and North Africa (MENA)	Sub-Saharan Africa
Afghanistan	Colombia	Algeria	Angola
Azerbaijan	Cuba	Bahrain	Burkina Faso
Bangladesh	El Salvador	Egypt	Burundi
Belarus	Honduras	Iran	Cameroon
Bhutan	Mexico	Iraq	Central African Republic
Brunei	Nicaragua	Jordan	Chad
China	Venezuela	Kuwait	Comoros
India		Libya	Democratic Republic of the Congo
Indonesia		Mauritania	Djibouti
Kazakhstan		Morocco	Eritrea
Kyrgyzstan		Oman	Ethiopia
Laos		Palestinian Territories	Gambia
Malaysia		Qatar	Guinea
Maldives		Saudi Arabia	Ivory Coast
Myanmar		Syria	Kenya
Nepal		Tunisia	Mali
North Korea		Turkey	Mozambique
Pakistan		United Arab Emirates	Niger
Russian Federation		Yemen	Nigeria
Sri Lanka			Rwanda
Tajikistan			Somalia
Turkmenistan			South Sudan
Uzbekistan			Sudan
Vietnam			Tanzania
			Togo
			Uganda

[117] For more information on this, see: WWL 2023 Country scores and ranks. Open Doors International, January 2023.

APPENDIX D: REGIONAL COMPARISON: 2023 GSRP

Regional comparison: 2023 gender SRP Pressure Points density table

The average number of Pressure Points per region in the WWL top 76 countries for each gender is listed in the table below.

	Male	Female
Sub-Saharan Africa	8.8	13.5
Middle East & North Africa	5.4	9.1
Asia	6.4	7.1
Latin America	15.1	5.1

Regional comparison: 2023 Top 5 Male and Female Pressure Points per region

Researchers used the frequency level of each Pressure Point to assess the relative risk. By assigning a weighted value to the frequency level, the frequency then informed the relative risk of a Pressure Point being used in a given country (see Methodology).

The Pressure Point by relative risk of the top 5 Pressure Points (for each gender) shows the relative frequency based on its reported occurrence or level of live risk within a particular country/region.

Top 5 Female Pressure Points by Relative Risk		
Region	**Pressure Point**	**Relative Pressure Point risk within each region**
Middle East and North Africa	Violence – sexual	11.4%
	Forced marriage	9.9%
	Incarceration by family (house arrest)	9.9%
	Enforced religious dress code	9.9%
	Violence – physical	8.9%
Sub-Saharan Africa	Violence – sexual	8.2%
	Forced marriage	7.5%
	Violence – physical	6.5%
	Violence – psychological	6.4%
	Denied custody of children	6.4%
Asia	Violence – sexual	12.5%
	Violence – physical	8.9%
	Forced marriage	8.7%
	Incarceration by family (house arrest)	8.7%
	Violence – Verbal	7.2%
Latin America	Violence – psychological	15.7%
	Violence – sexual	15.1%
	Violence – physical	13.2%
	Abduction	10.7%
	Trafficking	10.1%

Top 5 Male Pressure Points by Relative Risk		
Region	**Pressure Point**	**Relative Pressure Point risk within each region**
Middle East and North Africa	Violence – psychological	15.2%
	Violence – physical	12.8%
	Economic harassment via business/job/work access	12.0%
	Imprisonment by government	9.5%
	Forced out of home – expulsion	9.3%
Sub-Saharan Africa	Violence – physical	10.0%
	Violence – psychological	8.5%
	Imprisonment by government	8.3%
	Abduction	7.2%
	Violence – death	7.2%
Asia	Imprisonment by government	11.1%
	Economic harassment via business/job/work access	9.9%
	Military/militia conscription/service against conscience	8.9%
	Violence – psychological	8.9%
	Violence – physical	8.9%
Latin America	Violence – physical	8.3%
	Violence – psychological	7.8%
	Economic harassment via fines	7.6%
	Imprisonment by government	7.4%
	Travel bans/restrictions on movement	6.8%

Regional comparison: Top 3 countries to watch where gender most shaped religious persecution

Female		
Region	**Country**	**Top Pressure Points**
Middle East and North Africa	Syria	Violence – sexual, Abduction, Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
	Iran	Enforced religious dress code, Forced marriage, Imprisonment by government
	Egypt	Forced marriage, Abduction, Violence – sexual
Sub-Saharan Africa	Nigeria	Violence – sexual, Abduction, Violence – death
	Cameroon	Violence – sexual, Abduction, Violence – death
	Somalia	Denied legal ability to marry Christian spouse, Enforced religious dress code, Violence – physical
Asia	India	Denied communal resources, Violence – sexual, Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
	Pakistan	Violence – sexual, Abduction, False charges
	Nepal	Forced marriage, Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites,
Latin America	Colombia	Discrimination/harassment via education, Violence – sexual, Abduction
	Mexico	Violence – psychological, Violence – sexual, Abduction
	El Salvador	Violence – sexual, Violence – psychological, Abduction

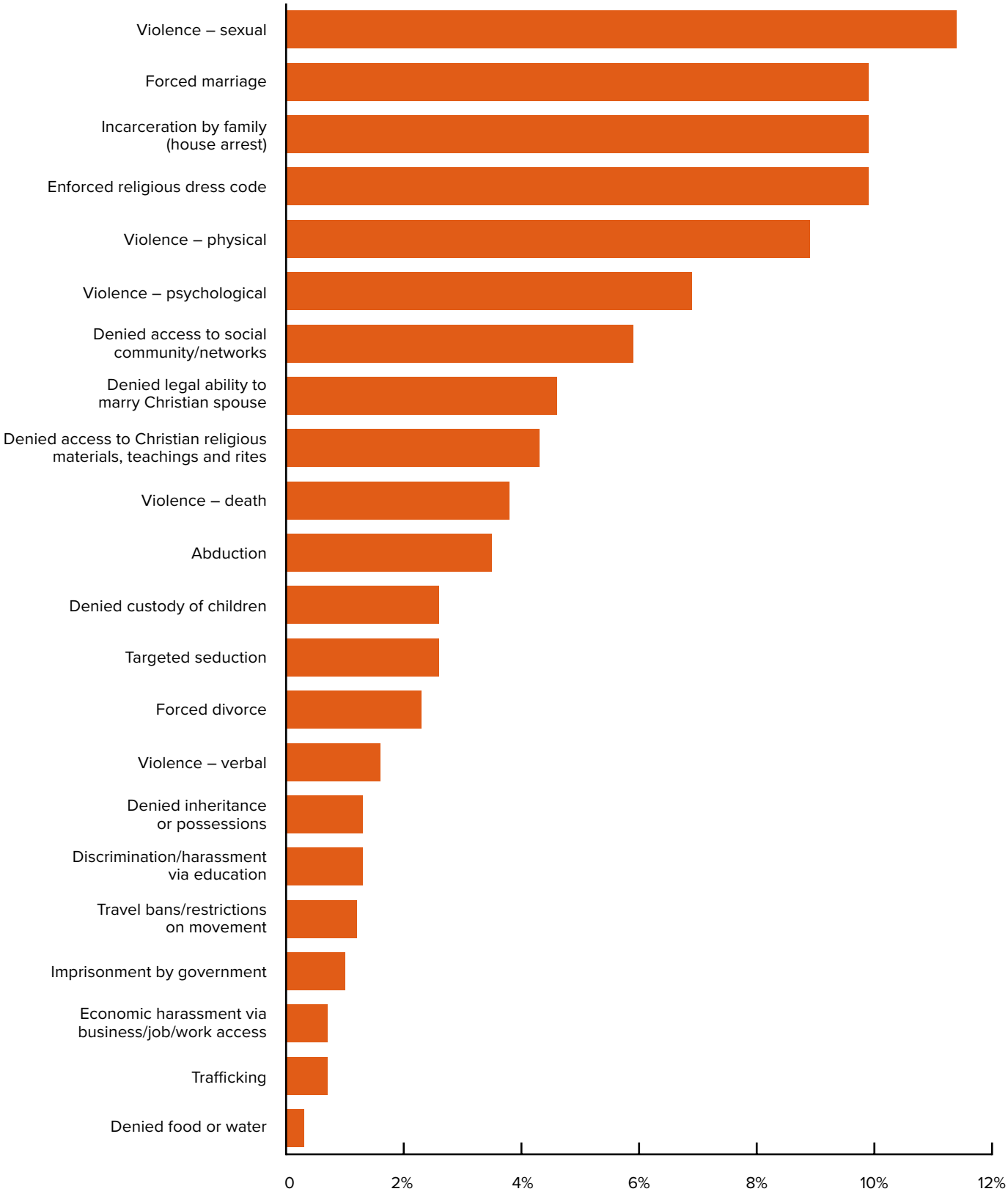
Male		
Region	**Country**	**Top Pressure Points**
Middle East and North Africa	Syria	Abduction, Imprisonment by government, Violence – death
	Libya	Forced to flee town/country, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites
	Egypt	Violence – death, Forced to flee town/country, Imprisonment by government
Sub-Saharan Africa	Nigeria	Abduction, Forced out of home – expulsion, Violence – death
	Cameroon	Violence – physical, Abduction, Imprisonment by government
	Sudan	Enforced religious dress code, Imprisonment by government, Violence – physical
Asia	India	Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Economic harassment via business/job/work access
	Nepal	Denied access to social community/networks, Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, Economic harassment via business/job/work access
	Pakistan	Military/militia conscription/service against conscience, False charges, Imprisonment by government
Latin America	Colombia	Economic harassment via fines, Forced out of home – expulsion, Imprisonment by government
	Nicaragua	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites, Travel bans/restrictions on movement, Imprisonment by government
	Mexico	Economic harassment via business/job/work access, Economic harassment via fines, Violence – psychological

APPENDIX E: MENA FOCUS: 2023 PRESSURE POINTS

MENA Focus: 2023 Female Top 76 WWL Pressure Points

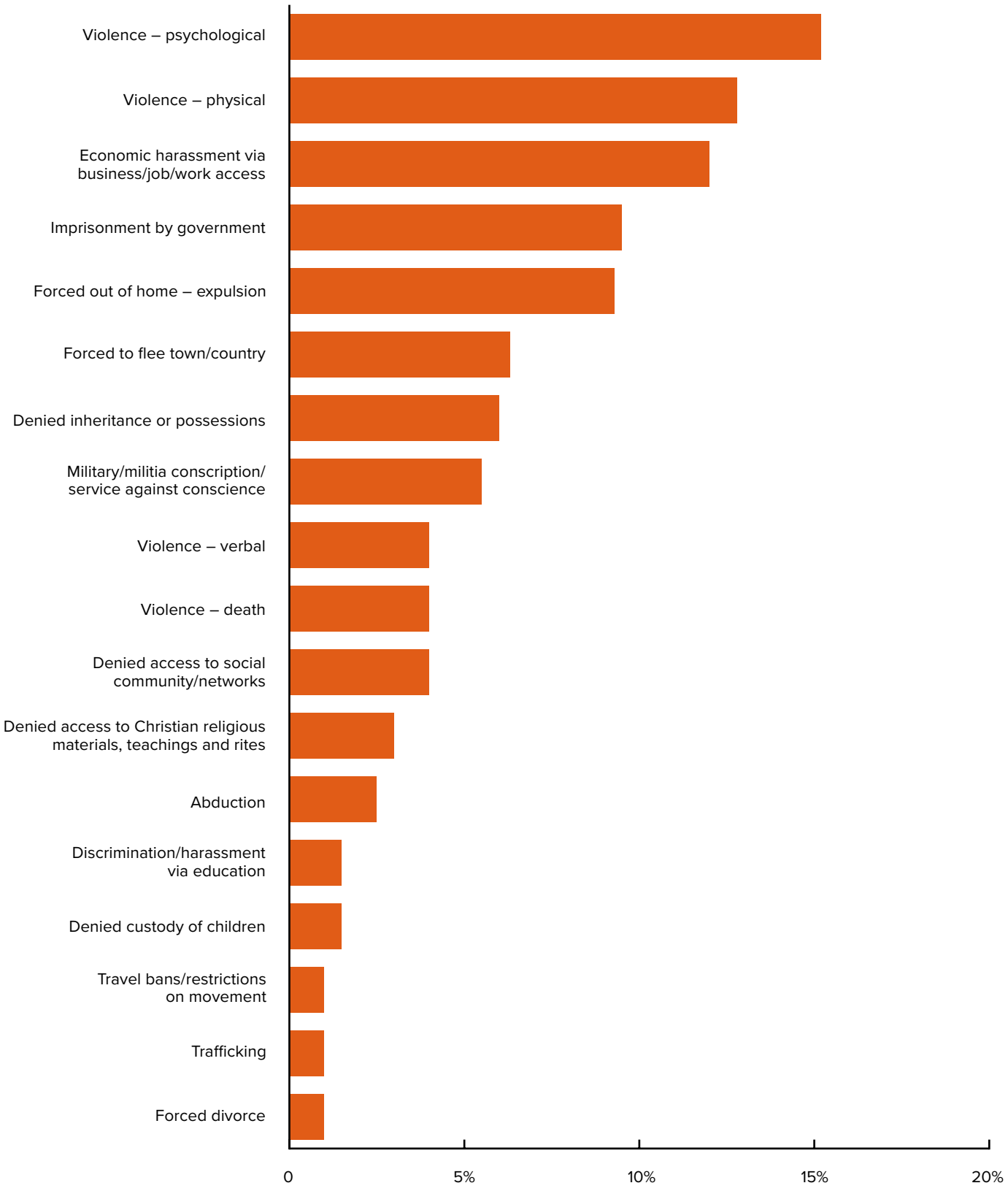
Researchers used the frequency level of each Pressure Point to assess the relative risk. By assigning a weighted value to the frequency level, the frequency then informed the relative risk of a Pressure Point being used in a given country (see Methodology).

The table below shows the Relative Pressure Point Risk within MENA for females, relative to other reported forms of pressure recorded within the region during the WWL 2023 reporting period.



MENA Focus: 2023 Male Top 76 WWL Pressure Points

The table below shows the Relative Pressure Point Risk within MENA for males, relative to other reported forms of pressure recorded within the region during the WWL 2023 reporting period.



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[password: freedom]