Open Doors

EXCLUDED

Social isolation of Christian children and youth



Impact of social exclusion

As humans, we are hardwired for connection. **But in 72% of the top 50 countries where Christians face the highest levels of persecution for their faith, Christian children and youth are socially excluded.**[1]

Christian children and youth face a diverse range of persecution and discrimination. For many, **their experience of living out their faith in a context of high persecution is profoundly lonely and isolating;** they are rejected by others and lack help and support. An expert on Sub-Saharan Africa explains that when children and teenagers are discovered to be Christian converts or publicly declare their faith, "they often experience expulsion from their communities, leading to social ostracization. **This social exclusion has ripple effects on various aspects of their lives**" including access to education and shared community resources.

In Mauritania and Cuba, school-age girls and boys find that once their faith is discovered, their former friends can reject them and view them as enemies. In the Arabian Peninsula, children who have become Christians from a Muslim background can endure social ostracization and abuse not only in the classroom, but also in public, at shopping malls and playgrounds. In the northern regions of Cameroon, children of convert parents can be shamed for their newfound faith, treated as social outcasts.

Social exclusion intersects with other aspects of social disadvantage, such as ethnic minority status, gender discrimination and poverty, to have a multidimensional impact on the lives of Christian children and adolescents. **This fragments relationships at multiple levels, resulting in a lack of social connectedness, social protection, social integration and power.** This impact is detailed in key areas below:

FAITH

Social exclusion harms the ability of Christian children and youth to grow in their faith and **fragments the persecuted church across the world**. "The potential consequences, including expulsion from their families and communities, effectively inhibit the freedom of young Christians to actively engage with their faith," a country expert on Comoros shares. Christian children and youth need connection to other people and community to help them overcome challenges in life, thrive in society and stay strong in their faith. **At a formative time of life, persecution that excludes and isolates restricts young people's ability to grow and learn in their faith.**

ISOLATION is defined as "being in a place or situation that is separate from others, the condition of being isolated"[2] or "the state of feeling alone and without friends or help."[3]

SOCIAL EXCLUSION is both a process and a state, which prevents individuals and groups from full participation in social, economic and political life and restricts their access to rights.[4] It is a process of "progressive social rupture, detaching groups and individuals from social relations and institutions and preventing them from full participation in the normal activities of the society in which they live."[5]

Exclusion also negatively impacts the future of the persecuted church. Children and adolescents who have experienced the long-lasting impacts of exclusion may struggle to heal from their harm, presenting an additional challenge to participating in church life as an adult.

WELLBEING

Isolation and social exclusion impacts young people's sense of belonging and identity, **shaping their mental health and psychosocial wellbeing for years to come**. Suffering social exclusion in childhood or adolescence is linked to negative repercussions on mental and emotional health, including mental health challenges such as depression, decreased self-esteem, anxiety, PTSD, poor sleep quality, and feelings of worthlessness.[6]

Developmental psychology research reveals that chronic repeated ostracization depletes children's coping

[1] The Pressure point 'Denied access to social community' was coded in 72% of the top 50 WWL countries in the 2024 reporting period. For more detail on the Pressure points and how this data has been collected, see the 'Methodology' section of the 2024 Gender Report.

[2] Definition of Isolation. The Britannica Dictionary, accessed 10 July 2024.

[3] Ibid.

[4] DFID Social Exclusion Review. Beall, J., and Piron, L.H., London School of Economics and Overseas Development Institute, May 2005.

[5] Social Exclusion: Comparative Analysis of Europe and Middle East Youth. Silver, H., SSRN Electronic Journal, 2007.

[6] Research in Developmental Psychology: Social Exclusion Among Children and Adolescents. Elenbaas, L., and Killen,M., Springer, Cham, pp.89-108, 2016.

resources, resulting in depression and helplessness[7] and can lead to dysfunctional reactions in the long run, including hampered decision making, increased anger and self-defeating perceptions and behaviors.[8] Social exclusion can also reduce an individual's sense of a meaningful existence and their hope for the future.[9]

PHYSICAL HEALTH

There is evidence that social exclusion can also contribute to physical health problems ranging from heightened stress to a weakened immune system. It can increase the risk of developing dementia by up to 50%, and stroke and cardiovascular disease by 30%.[10] **Shockingly, social exclusion and isolation can even significantly increase the risk of premature death**, carrying a similar mortality impact to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.[11]

RELATIONSHIPS

Children and youth rely on the protection of adults and often lack the physical and legal resources to protect themselves. Loss of this "safety net" due to exclusion and isolation makes young people additionally vulnerable. Isolated children and youth are at greater risk of exploitation, including other forms of persecution pressure such as trafficking, targeted seduction, grooming and sexual exploitation.

Exclusion and isolation break the social bonds that hold groups together. They rupture individual relationships, which shapes a child's ability to trust – or indeed not trust - others throughout their life. Social exclusion has a profound impact on children in terms of relational self-esteem.[12]

OPPORTUNITIES

Social isolation and exclusion from communities can seriously restrict educational and livelihood opportunities for young Christians.[13] Christian children and young people in some World Watch List (WWL) countries can be denied formal education, ending up stuck in high-risk, low-income professions. Once in the world of work, systemic exclusion also impacts the ability of Christians to access stable employment. Such patterns as a result of social exclusion embed cycles of stigma and poverty, exacerbating the marginalization of Christians.



Tara (name changed), a teenager from India, faces exclusion in her own home. Nobody in the house talks to her or even allows her to go to the kitchen, lest she pollutes the food and water with her "unclean faith".

[7] Ostracism. Williams, K., Annual Review of Psychology, 58, pp.425-452, 2007.

[8] The Social Psychology of Exclusion. Hutchinson, P., Abrams, D., and Christian, J., in the Multidisciplinary Handbook of Social Exclusion Research, John Wiley and Sons, London, pp.29-57, 2007.

[9] The Social Psychology of Exclusion. Hutchinson, P., Abrams, D., and Christian, J., in the Multidisciplinary Handbook of Social Exclusion Research, John Wiley and Sons, London, pp.29-57, 2007.

[10] Loneliness and social isolation are health risks. World Health Organization Commission on Social Connection, November 2023.

[11] Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The US Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. US Public Health Services, 2023.

[12] Who Are the Children Most Vulnerable to Social Exclusion? The Moderating Role of Self-Esteem, Popularity, and Nonverbal Intelligence on Cognitive Performance Following Social Exclusion. Tobia,V., Riva, P., and Caprin, C., Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology, 45, pp.789-801, 2017.

[13] For more information on discrimination and harassment via education see the 2023 Children and Youth Interim Update: Pathways Unlocked.

How do Christian children and youth experience isolation and social exclusion?

In results from 2024, **patterns of social exclusion were seen in 72% of WWL top 50 countries.** Verbal harassment, a key tool of exclusion, was seen in 92% of WWL top 50 countries. From this research on how Christian children and teenagers experience faith-based persecution, the following patterns of exclusion were observed:

FROM PEERS

Christian children and young people are at risk of experiencing, very early on, something we all fear – social isolation. They can experience painful rejection from those their own age in places where social, cultural or religious norms normalize the marginalization of Christians.

Christian children can experience extensive bullying through their years at school, with classmates mocking the way they pray and harassing them for their beliefs. Christian pupils who are a religious and ethnic minority may experience targeted abuse, with gum being stuck on their hair or their bags cut open with blades. For adolescents, telling their classmates about their faith can lead to loss of most, if not all, of their friends. Children may not even verbalize their beliefs, but can experience abuse due to their faith being visible from the holidays they celebrate, the way they eat or how they dress. Such examples from countries such as Malaysia, Myanmar and Morocco underline how Christian young people are alienated by their social groups and made to feel like they don't belong.

FROM THE FAMILY OR THE STATE

Control exerted over the lives of young people, either by their families or by the state, can compound social exclusion.

In Algeria and China, state restrictions on Christian places of worship and gatherings prevents, in particular, Christians under the age of 18 from meeting with other Christians. An expert on North Africa shares "the most worrying thing for the future of the children's faith is that they are more and more isolated from other children." In other places, Christian youth are held back from social community by their families. They may long to meet with other Christians in their town or village but are forbidden from doing so. House arrest can be used as a tool for social exclusion, with children and young people being locked in a room or banned from contact with others. Disconnection from Christian communities makes learning about and following Jesus as a young person a challenging and solitary experience.

FROM THE COMMUNITY OR WIDER FAMILY

As a child, being excluded by your community is not only an isolating process, but one that shapes your understanding of your identity in relation to the world around you. Young Christian converts in parts of Asia are likely to be, at the least, shunned by their wider family, and may even be formally expelled from the community. In many regions of the world, young people who have chosen to become Christians may be disowned from their family group, and social ties to uncles, aunties, grandparents, or cousins may be broken due to their faith. For Christian children and youth, their wider family and community can be their safety net, and these ruptured relationships can make them much more vulnerable in the long run.

> **One expert on Bangladesh explains that "young Christian children, especially Muslim background children are extremely vulnerable to persecution, not just physically, but mentally too. As children, they never thought their friends, relatives, and neighbors would be angry with them for believing in Jesus."[14]**

FROM AUTHORITY FIGURES

Those who hold power in the lives of children and young people, such as teachers or youth group leaders, possess the ability to lift up or bring down. In places like Cameroon, India and Central Asia some authority figures abuse their power to shame and persecute young Christians, which gives others permission to join in the abuse. Children of Christians can be humiliated and slandered by teachers in front of other pupils, and may be given lower grades, pressurized to partake in rites linked to the majority religion, or deprived of opportunities due to their religious identity. There have also been reports of teachers revealing to the whole class that a child is a Christian believer, opening them up to derision and scorn from classmates.

WITHIN STRUCTURES AND INSTITUTIONS

Christian children and youth living in WWL countries also experience exclusion at structural and institutional levels. Examples include limited social rights or systematic neglect by authorities. For example, denying children the opportunity to have a legal identity as a Christian, or barring access to school enrolment and educational opportunities on the basis of their faith. In some of the WWL countries, state authorities fail to implement policy measures that care for and address the specific needs of Christian children and youth.

Faith-based structural exclusion may also restrict children and youth's access to resources and livelihoods and exacerbate material deprivation. Their ability to enact change is restricted, particularly for those who belong to minorities or vulnerable groups. As Christian children and adolescents grow into adults this contributes not just to feelings of isolation but also powerlessness to effect change in their context.

[14] As shared by an expert on Bangladesh.

CASE STUDY: EGYPT

Adel lives on the outskirts of Cairo, where in the slum-like neighborhoods there is a high level of faith-based persecution. Violence, harassment and discrimination are a reality of life for both adults and children.

Adel, at 10 years old, has had a lot to deal with in his young life: growing up in deep poverty and with a father addicted to alcohol, he was forced to start working from a very young age. If he did not bring home enough money at the end of the day, his dad would beat him. "I hated my life," Adel shares. "I didn't know what the purpose of it was."

Adel went to church from time to time, but never went to Sunday school or learned a lot about God at home. Meanwhile, at his job, Adel was humiliated by his boss and teammates: he says he was paid less than his Muslim coworkers and his teammates would make fun of him and call him "crazy" because he is a Christian.[15] He describes the loneliness he experienced "I didn't know a lot about God yet," Adel explains, "so I didn't know what to say when they said bad things about Jesus. I did not have any answers. Also, I didn't have anyone to ask for the answers. I felt ashamed of my Christianity."

Adel was looking for a way to escape his unhappiness and found a children's ministry class with other Christians where he could talk to people about God. He shares how important this has become to him "I decided to go to the classes as much as possible."

This safe space has given Adel an opportunity to connect with other Christians, grow in his faith and feel a sense of belonging. Adel's struggle isn't over yet, and neither is the journey with him and his family. But now he knows he is not alone – he has people to talk to, a support network around him, and is better equipped to face the harassment that is too often part of his daily life.



Illustrative image

[15] It is important to note here that work conditions for all children in these workshops are bad. Underpayment can happen based on religion, but it is not something we see happen structurally.

The global picture

Four years of Specific Religious Persecution (SRP) research on Christian children and youth shows consistent patterns of persecution and discrimination that are isolating, identity-shaping and harsh.

TOP PRESSURE POINTS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN TOP 50 WWL COUNTRIES

2024 Rank	Pressure point	Percentage of top 50 WWL countries
1	Discrimination/harassment via education	100%
2	Violence – psychological	92%
2	Violence – Verbal	92%
4	Denied access to Christian religious materials, teachings and rites	90%
5	Denied access to a Christian parent	88%
6	Violence – physical	74%
7	Denied access to social community/networks	72%
8	Denied legal identity as a Christian	54%
8	Forced marriage	54%
10	Violence – sexual	50%

Discrimination/harassment via education (the focus of last year's interim update[16]) remains the top Pressure point over the last 4 years of children and youth specific research, and was identified in every one of the WWL top 50 countries this year and last.[17] Psychological violence is a persistent challenge, often reflecting the pressure on Christian children and youth to conform to the majority religion, as well as the pressure and threats placed on young converts. The top 5 Pressure points present a consistent picture, highlighting how vulnerable children and youth are to persecution, especially those who belong to marginalized groups.

In many societies around the world, age can equal status, meaning that the suffering of young Christians can be unseen in these contexts. Young Christians who are converts are even more vulnerable to persecution. They experience the tension of a double identity, being Muslim or another faith on the outside but Christian on the inside. Living in such a way is confusing, learning that lying is wrong, but also being told by your parents that you should hide your faith if asked. They are also more likely to be targeted for physical and verbal abuse, for example being called traitors or infidels by their friends and neighbors, or being victims of acts of violence.

[16] Pathways (un)locked: 2023 Children and Youth Interim Update. Open Doors International. September 2023.

[17] This refers to two reporting periods (WWL 2023 and 2024) covering from 1 October 2021 to 30 September 2023.

As children and youth suffer faith-based rejection and violence in their formative years, how families, churches and communities respond has the potential to support and strengthen young Christians. For example, Rania[18] and her family converted to Christianity from Islam in Egypt. She shares about the impact on her children, "The hardest part of the journey was watching my children suffer. They had to leave behind their family, their friends and their school as well and get adjusted to a different life with less money. They are raised as Christians inside the house, but outside the house they have to live as Muslims, like us. It broke my heart when my oldest son said to me one day: 'Why did God save me from death? I'd rather have died than have this life.' He became depressed and didn't want to go to school anymore, he was too afraid to make a mistake and reveal he was a Christian...**What helped most was that my son was invited to a camp for Christian children in the same situation. He made a lot of friends there. He doesn't feel so alone anymore and is happy again.** He even tells his little brother Bible stories now."

This illustrates the positive impact that Christian community and peer support can have on lives of young people. While Christian children and youth can risk discrimination, harassment and violence because of their faith identity, or even have to hide it completely, **building a sense of belonging and social connectedness can help individuals to thrive and have the freedom to grow in their faith.**



Anara (name changed) is a teenage convert from Central Asia. Her college friends shunned her because of her newfound faith.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Integrate the principles of FoRB according to Article 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in all programs designed for protection and promotion of children's rights;

2. Train, support and involve local faith actors in the discussions with the religious community leaders for the elimination of harmful practices inflicted on children, including actively contributing towards the elimination of such practices whenever they occur.



Ibrahim (name changed), a young believer from a Muslim background praying at an Open Doors youth event in Ethiopia. He kept his faith a secret at first, but was discovered, so he had to flee home and live on the streets.

[18] Name changed for security reasons. See more at 'If we wanted to live, we had to become secret believers': Raina's story. Open Doors, 24 April 2023.

COVER

Bijli's (name changed) family are one of just a few Christian families in their village of 50 houses in Bangladesh. They face rejection and isolation from their Muslim community. This is especially hard for 10-year-old Bijli. "My friends don't want to play with me. They push me," she says.