

WWL 2022

Article on Gender-Specific Religious Persecution (GRSP)

It took Sarah years to decide to follow Jesus. It was *such* a risky choice. As a teenager in North Africa, she didn't just grow up Muslim by convenience or convention; her father was an imam and held the household in an iron grip. As a child, she was harshly punished if she wasn't a good enough Muslim. Daring to leave Islam had nearly unthinkable consequences. The day her father discovered the Bible hidden underneath her bed, he beat her and screamed at her, "You're an apostate, you deserve to be dead."

What followed that day, that year, and then years into the future was exactly what she had feared. The physical violence, although awful, was not the most effective coercive force she faced. When she was young, her family limited her social circle; keeping her socially dependent upon her family, and setting a pattern of social ostracization as a form of control.

When she continued to persevere in her Christian faith, Sarah was subjected to verbal harassment from family members, who falsely accused her of leaving the family home to live out of wedlock with a man, being immoral and dishonoring the family. This untrue accusation was painful, deeply humiliating and totally isolating for her; Sarah had few protections in her patriarchal North African society, and little legal recourse in actual practice. In her context, the coercive control and violence which her family exercised over her was considered a normal and even appropriate means to control their wayward daughter.

According to global research, Sarah's experience of religious persecution is more typical than not. Behind closed doors, in ways that blend into the ambient violence and control of women, this form of religious persecution receives the unspoken approval of a disapproving society.

Although she was not forcibly married, Sarah was told that marriage was a way to reconcile and stop the gossip. "The man you marry will cleanse you from all your sins and we will be able to meet again." It was the pressure of being denied social access to her family, combined with the moral accusations that led Sarah, as an adult, to try to find 'belonging' again with her family by placating them with a marriage of their choosing.

The marriage did not create peace for Sarah. Instead, it produced a cycle of sexual violence and confinement to the house until her husband also kicked her out. She was left with nothing but the clothes she was wearing in a society where it is not socially acceptable for a woman to live on her own, even if she has the means to do so.

Open Doors World Watch Research (WWR) annually investigates gender-specific religious persecution (GSRP) dynamics, to better understand situations like Sarah's. The 2022 GSRP report to be published by WWR in March 2022 details the typical global means of religious persecution for men and women in the 76 countries most hostile to Christianity. Women and girls tend to suffer more often for their

faith in the shadows of the domestic sphere or small social circles, with shame often playing a crucial role. Forced marriage, sexual violence, other physical violence and incarceration by family are the most common tactics across 50 countries according to the 2022 report.

For many Christians, religious persecution takes place in contexts with more overt violence and danger than Sarah faced. In several regions throughout the world, Christian men and women suffer additional religious persecution at the hands of state or non-state actors. The situation in northern Nigeria continues to pose the most extreme threat to Christian women and girls. “In cases of abduction, the moment these girls are abducted, they are subjected to all manner of evil just to take control of their minds. Once their minds are affected, these girls will do everything they are asked to do”, a Nigerian respondent shares. “While the parents fight to free their daughters, the abductors continue to sexually abuse the girls, spike their food and drink [with drugs], control what they wear and where they sleep, and continually evoke evil spirits upon them to the point that these girls completely lose their minds and can’t think of going back to their homes.”

Among the topics highlighted in 2022 is the targeting of men if they are church leaders, used as examples to intimidate whole congregations through highly visible acts such as extortion, kidnappings and killings. More generally, men of the church are subject to visible forms of coercion and punishment for their faith: physical violence, economic harassment, government imprisonment and militia/military conscription. Whether targeting the individual men or women of the Christian community, gender-specific religious persecution isolates the vulnerabilities or strengths of each gender in order to cause damage to the whole Christian community.

For both men and women, psychological violence has risen to the top five Pressure Points¹ and, many would argue, is the crux of every incident of religious persecution. Not just the mental hardship or emotional anguish which may accompany bereavement, violence or exclusion, but the ultimate question: Is your faith choice worth the suffering? Now aged 27, Sarah’s response remains clear: “I chose a challenging path, that is to follow Jesus. I knew it would be hard, but I didn’t lose hope. I tried and tried many times, I was exhausted, I fell many times, but rose again. I don’t have the fear I used to have when I was younger. God is here and He’s working in me.”

¹ Pressure Points and related GSRP methodology can be found at: <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/GSRP-Methodology-March-2021.pdf>, pp.4-6 (password: freedom).