

INSECURITY

Introduction

Gender-specific religious persecution is unrelenting. Insecure contexts compound existing vulnerabilities, exacerbating certain forms of gender-specific religious persecution.

There are multiple reasons why a place may be insecure – economic collapse, natural disaster, political instability and conflict to name a few. These often interrelating elements undermine human security¹ and aggravate existing vulnerabilities, making it even harder for an individual, family or church community to bear.

One of the dynamics that can create insecurity is a high level of direct violence. **This report will primarily focus on violent forms of insecurity (hereafter “violent insecurity”)**, such as religiously targeted violence, armed conflict and criminal violence. The consequences of insecurity are also significant; they include impoverishment, forced displacement and a normalization of violence. While no setting may ever be completely secure and safe, there is a spectrum of security to insecurity – with the countries under focus in this report towards the extremely insecure end of the scale.

In some extreme instances, violence impacts entire regions and countries; the vast majority of the population feels the weight of insecurity. In other contexts, **violence has a disproportionate impact on specific people groups**. In the Manipur conflict in India, for example, both the causes and implications of insecurity compound existing ethnic, gendered and religious vulnerabilities. As explored in the following sections, violent forms of insecurity tend to see women and girls more vulnerable to sexual violence, whereas men and boys face a heightened risk of physical violence. The story of two Kuki Christian women in Manipur experiencing severe sexual violence, as the father and brother of one victim is beaten to death, is a shocking example of this.²

There are many other forms of insecure contexts which often have local manifestations. For example, the struggle for territorial control between criminal gangs in Mexico has made Christians living in affected areas more vulnerable to attack. Church leaders, often male in Mexico, can be particularly targeted because of the perceived threat they pose to criminal operations.³

But there is hope. Most notably, **local faith actors (LFAs) are uniquely placed to support individuals and communities impacted by gender-vulnerabilities, religious persecution and insecurity**, as well as to advocate on their behalf. Around the world, they are helping to meet the physical, mental and spiritual needs of highly vulnerable people, although often may need external support to do so.



Seven years of gender-specific religious persecution (GSRP) research findings by Open Doors, in collaboration with ServAfrica, has confirmed a clear pattern, that whether male or female, young or old, religious persecution is rarely experienced as a single, isolated Pressure point.

A multiplicity of actors enact GSRP in a myriad of ways, shaped heavily by individual socio-economic contexts and legal environments.

For men and boys, GSRP is focused, visible and severe. It is marked by targeted physical violence, including lethal violence, as well as by state and economic pressures.

For women and girls, it is complex, hidden and violent. It is characterized by sexual violence and forced marriage, as well as by insidious, invisible violence behind closed doors.

¹ What is Human Security? UN Trust Fund for Human Security, 2018.

² Manipur assault video emboldens women to speak out. Arya, D., BBC News, 23 July 2023.

³ Mexico: Full Country Dossier. Open Doors International, May 2023.

Overview

Insecure contexts and associated violence compound existing vulnerabilities, exacerbating certain forms of gender-specific religious persecution (GSRP).

Violence acts as a spark that exposes and exacerbates pre-existing vulnerabilities. Accordingly, in contexts where violence is high, faith-related sexual violence for women and physical violence for men, including lethal violence, are more common. Insecurity can incite new forms of violence as well as exacerbate everyday violence, such as intimate partner violence (IPV).

Marginalized Christians, especially women, can be particularly vulnerable in insecure contexts, such as settings of conflict, forced displacement and criminal violence.

There is no single experience of being a religious minority. Many factors impact a person's experience: their geographical location, political views, gender, age and health needs. By and large, however, it is those already vulnerable who become more at risk when violence escalates. Women belonging to religious minorities are often one such group.

Violent insecurity leaves an indelible imprint on societies for decades.

Even when violence formally ceases, men and women of marginalized religious communities still face compounding challenges. This can include the legacies of trauma, the challenges of forced displacement settings and continued marginalization when societies restructure, all of which can be impacted by religion and gender.

Local faith actors (LFAs) are uniquely placed to respond to gender- and religious-specific needs.

LFAs are often the first responders in times of crisis. They are trusted by and often have easy access to impacted communities. They are uniquely equipped to understand the needs of religious minorities, including their psychological and spiritual needs. Increasingly, they are working towards gender-sensitive approaches.

Before violence escalates

How a society treats its most vulnerable in times of stability gives some indication of how they will be treated in times of insecurity.

Much of the violence and discrimination that is present in situations of insecurity already exists in society, even before insecurity and violence escalate. Contexts of insecurity and violence are fed by and perpetuate inequality and social hierarchies. GSRP research over seven years has outlined how religious affiliation and gender can contribute to inequality and dictate positions in social hierarchies.

When violent insecurity escalates, these patterns of inequality don't disappear. Instead, they mutate, exacerbated by wider contexts of violence. Attention therefore needs to be paid before situations escalate to the pre-existing vulnerabilities that a person, family or community might hold.

Pre-existing patterns of GSRP

Gender-based violence can be used against women, girls, men and boys to assert and reproduce gender roles and norms. When thinking about persecution against Christians, **this is commonly used to reinforce notions of gender and identity that are intertwined with other belief systems, hierarchies and majority religions.**

Despite the near universality of gender violence, local manifestations are highly variable. They vary depending on how gender is defined and what resources are available to those who have been harmed. **Kinship structures, gender inequalities, and levels of violence in the wider society are all factors that influence how men and women experience gender-specific abuse in different places.** A regional expert on Bangladesh summarizes the country context: "Both men and women experience violence, but the distinguishing feature is that men most commonly are subjected to visible acts, often in public, of religious persecution, whereas women more commonly experience invisible persecution which often involve shame and sexuality."

There are also non-violent patterns of GSRP. A key one is **socio-economic vulnerability**. Men can be culturally perceived to be the financial provider for their family. As such, they can be particularly targeted by economic forms of persecution. For example, Economic harassment via business/job/work access is a Pressure point that has consistently been characteristic of the persecution of Christian men across multiple years of research.

How does this connect to insecurity?

Insecure contexts can exacerbate those inequalities that are already present in a society. Ever-present gender disparities and other overlapping inequalities and violences shape how people experience, and are harmed in, situations of instability.

Violent insecurity provides an opportunity for inequality to be reframed. But there is also a risk of inequalities becoming further entrenched as people strive for stability. **When tracking examples of gender violence through pre, current, and post-violent states, a thread of gender inequality and discrimination can be traced through each.** Women and men also have different access to resources, such as power and decision making.

One example of where people are trying to put a stop to the escalation of violence is the field of conflict prevention. There is general consensus that conflict prevention necessitates looking at the structures of a society that impact the complexities and impact of conflict. **A holistic view of such structures includes considerations of gender inequality and religious persecution.**



See:

A Web of Forces: The 2023 Gender Report. Open Doors International, 2023. To explore other GSRP research, see [Gender-specific religious persecution](#). Open Doors Analytical [password: freedom]

Gender violence: A Cultural Perspective. Merry, S.E., Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Gender Equality and Peacebuilding: An operational framework. CIDA, January 2001.

Contemporary conflict resolution. Ramsbotham, O., Miall, H., & Woodhouse, T., Polity, 2016.