

The journey to a Gender and Religious Freedom Network

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Abstract

In the early 2000s, Release International and Open Doors realized that the persecution experienced by women was different than that experienced by men. This article details the development of the Gender and Religious Freedom Network, including conferences in Marcham UK, Leuven Belgium and Abuja Nigeria.

Keywords Women and religious freedom, gender and religious freedom, intersectionality.

How did we start talking about gender and persecution? It began with women. Multiple organizations and ministries were recognizing that the experience of Christian women facing persecution was very different from that of men. However, often the evidence was presented through a masculine lens that was neglecting the pressure points and cultural nuances that women faced.

At Release International, a UK sister entity to the Voice of the Martyrs organization founded by Richard Wurmbrand, a director came back from visiting India full of regret. He explained that a woman had shared deeply distressing stories of violence related to her Christian faith, but he felt it would have been culturally inappropriate to ask deeper questions, nor was he able offer her comfort through touch as she grew visibly distressed by recounting such trauma. For he was a man and she was a woman.

This event, along with those experienced by other male colleagues, led to the creation of a new department within Release International called Release Women, and I became its programme leader in 2009. The purpose was to develop specifically designed international projects focussed on women, so as to build their resilience to persecution, and to engage more strategically with women in the UK to fund these projects. There was no start-up funding and at the beginning, I was encouraged to work with a cost-neutral budget. Interestingly, this fact reflects a re-

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CHRISTIANS	Women	Men	Men ◀	▶ Women	
Weekly attendance	53%	46%			+7
Daily prayer	61%	51%			+10
Importance of Religion	68%	61%			+7
Belief in heaven	91%	89%			+2
Belief in hell	78%	76%			+1
Belief in angels	88%	84%			+3

MUSLIMS	Women	Men	Men ◀	▶ Women	
Weekly attendance	42%	70%			+7
Daily prayer	72%	71%			+2
Importance of Religion	76%	76%			0
Belief in heaven	94%	93%			0
Belief in hell	88%	88%			0
Belief in angels	86%	85%			+1

Table 1: Among Christians, women are more religious than men on all measures; gender gaps among Muslims are less consistent. Average percentage-point difference between men and women on measures of religious practice, commitment and belief.

peated gender gap in funding of so-called ‘women’s ministry’ projects, where most of the work is done by unpaid members of a larger team composed of voluntary and part-time staff. As the Rise in Strength gathering of 60 women leaders in June 2019, supported by the Lausanne Movement and the World Evangelical Alliance, stated, the top challenge for Christian women leaders is “the ability to raise the funds for the work which we feel called to.”²

In the early years, the focus remained strictly on women. A similar development occurred within other organizations such as Open Doors. This was a sensible approach, supported by evidence from the Pew Research Forum (2016) that women had a greater affiliation with religion globally and that Christian women are more active in worship and church than men. As the projects grew with Release Women, the magnitude of the mission before us was overwhelming.

It was time for us to bring academics, practitioners and those experiencing persecution first-hand together, to collaborate and coordinate what we were doing and to be generous in sharing our learning and growth in this area.

² For more detail, see the Rise in Strength website, www.riseinstrength.net.

In 2016, in the village of Marcham just outside Oxford, UK, a group of 28 people gathered to discuss women and persecution. The event was scheduled immediately in advance of a Religious Liberty Partnership meeting that would become known as the Marcham Conference. Release International and the International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF), through the Evangelical Alliance in Denmark, helped to secure funding for what has become a movement and a network with an expanding global reach.

Throughout the three days, evidence was presented, and conversations were shared that resulted in the production of a “Message to the Global Church on the Double Vulnerability of Women due to Gender and Religion” (Marcham Message 2017). In that message, we declared:

We grieve that:

Women in such communities often face multiple forms of discrimination and violence, including restrictions on freedom of dress and movement, employment and legal discrimination, false charges, reprisals for conversion, sexual harassment, forced marriage, kidnapping, rape and other forms of sexual violence, including human trafficking.

Women face violence within their homes, families and churches. This can include neglect, and verbal, physical, emotional, psychological, sexual and spiritual abuse. Such violence:

- can also be experienced by wives of Christian leaders; many stories remain untold.
- is a symptom of deeper issues, often driven by cultural and societal norms. Concerns include poor education, lack of teaching within the Church, lack of legal rights, lack of support services, and impunity for perpetrators.

The content of this letter was consistent with the messages shared by others working in this area across the globe. Three key aspects have emerged which have influenced further dialogues, research and consultations that occurred in Leuven, Belgium (2018) and Abuja, Nigeria (2019).

First, we needed to hear and understand more about the specific issues faced by men as well, along with more in-depth evidence concerning women. This information began to emerge in 2018 with the first of three exceptional reports from the World Watch Research Unit on ‘Gender-Specific Religious Persecution’ (Fisher and Miller 2018, 2019; Fisher, Miller and Mayer 2020). Second, we began to see that the pressure points for women facing persecution were invisible, complex and violent but that under-reporting was blinding the global church to this issue (Fisher and Miller 2018). Third, stark evidence continues to support our claim in the Marcham Letter that the church is complicit with those who violate women by offering

impunity, making these actions low-risk to their perpetrators. The violations are overlooked due to existing societal and cultural norms that effectively dominate and silence the church (Fisher, Miller and Mayer 2020:22).

When women suffer as a result of their faith, the pain is not typically limited to a single act of violence or abuse. As women are persecuted through acts of gender-based violence and inequitable treatment, the effects break down the family unit, violate the perceived purity that their male relatives endorse and 'own,' and therefore shatter the Christian community. This is a highly effective strategy frequently applied by those who want to crush Christian minorities in their midst.

The profound trauma that these women face has been described as leaving them in a 'living death' (Fisher, Miller and Mayer 2020:16). Dolan (2011:128) highlights the effect on men being that "contrary to hegemonic models, they are unable to protect [and this] further breaks down the sense of self." Overlaying this problem are the under-reported acts of sexual violence towards men and forced participation in these atrocities, which could also impose their own version of 'living death' (or perhaps hidden death).

In terms of influence, how does a drop become a stream, then a river and finally a flood? In April 2018, a *kairos* moment occurred and both a philosophical and a practical change was initiated, as our focus on women and persecution shifted to *gender and religious freedom*. I was asked to deliver a presentation at a Religious Liberty Partnership (RLP) conference in Washington on women and persecution. By then, an effective and active steering group on the topic had been created with Helene Fisher and Elizabeth Miller from Open Doors, Christof Sauer of the IIRF, and myself. I requested that we do a joint presentation so that we could share the findings on 'Gender-Specific Religious Persecution' from World Watch Research (Fisher and Miller 2018). The RLP targets key decision makers and leaders in this field; thus our audience was 80% male. As we prepared, we had a sense that we were embarking on more than a presentation, and that God seemed to be moving us into a space or time of which we understood little. We made sure to begin with the specific persecution that men suffer. We progressed to present on women in the same way; by then, this mostly male gathering was fully engaged in the greater and tragic complexities of gender-specific persecution.

The next day, the RLP was invited to meet with members of the U.S. Senate on Capitol Hill. Before we left Washington, significant alliances and relationships were formed that continue to aid our work, and Gender and Religious Freedom had become task force of the RLP.

Since then, we have worked closely with the World Evangelical Alliance in presenting on this subject at the UN Commission for the Status of Women in 2018 and 2019. More government committees for freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) have

engaged with this topic, such as those in the Netherlands, UK, USA and Canada. Our recommendations were included in the Bishop of Truro's report on the persecution of Christians (UK), and we continue to have a very good relationship with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (now known as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office), having just been requested to lead a Gender and FoRB Working Group for the UK FoRB Forum. Gender issues are being mainstreamed in several ministries and organizations, yet some remain silent on the issue.

In today's context, gender is a complicated and complex subject, one that is being redefined and even reimagined. As people of faith, we need to discuss and wrestle with this situation. But if we have learnt anything about gender and persecution, it is that we need to sit with those who are in deep pain because of how they are defined and treated, and not marginalize them as we have done with women for millennia.

Our network, Gender and Religious Freedom are increasingly welcomed in spaces where we can debate and listen to others with contrary views, always giving and in the hope of receiving respect and dignity.

I have heard time and time again that women are the 'emotional ones' and that men 'do the facts and don't engage in emotion.' I have further heard that women are less effective leaders because of their lack of objectivity. None of these statements are true.

As people of faith, we have a Creator who feels deeply about the issues raised here and in all the articles in this journal. If we deny our own emotions, we deny that part of the Creator's image that we all bear. Emotion is often minimized or disallowed in the field of FoRB. We deliver the facts, we write statements of 'deep concern,' or we craft an advocacy policy and organize an event with people of power and influence. But when do we give ourselves and each other time to feel and express the pain, injustice and anger that we *should* be feeling because women and men of religious minorities are facing more violence and discrimination than ever before?

A Nigerian female pastor shared with a small steering group for Release Women in 2016 just before the Marcham Conference. She ended by saying, "Weep until heaven has no choice but to open the doors. It's time for a divine strategy! Then stop weeping and get on."

1. Vision and aims of the Gender and Religious Freedom Network

1.1 Our vision

- We aim to unlock and expand the resilience of Christian women and men experiencing persecution for their faith.
- We are women and men who recognise the complex and hidden nature of gender-specific persecution of Christian women and girls, alongside the severe and focused nature of religious persecution of men and boys.

- We are a forum committed to hearing the authentic voice of women, whilst not negating the known ways in which men suffer for their faith.
- We are committed to collaborative, evidence-based and multidisciplinary approaches.

1.2 Our aims

- *To create space* both online and in person to share relevant research, reports and broader communications on the subject of gender and religious persecution. This includes updating the website, online webinars and training and consultations.
- *To be an accessible network* that ensures expertise aiming for change at the grassroots and through policy and practices at its highest level. This will be done through connections in this forum and with other networks that intersect in wider areas of influence. Also, in joining Freedom of Religions or Belief (FoRB) forums and working groups allied to government departments and international bodies.
- *To work for the good of all in our field of influence* we actively avoid competition between organisations or individuals but promote the achievements of all whilst contributing with robust and respectful debate and discussion where appropriate.
- *To be intentionally intergenerational*, reaching out to those beginning their career in the area of FoRB or ministries in gender and religious persecution. We create interactions that enhance mentoring between those with expertise or first-hand experience and those who are growing and developing in this field. However, everyone is learning.
- *To be create equity of voice*. This means that we aim for sharing platforms of influence without hierarchy or primacy ensuring that our communication allows for women or men, old or young, any nation, tribe or tongue to be represented and valued.
- *As a forum, we are Christian and we believe in freedom of religion* for all faiths or none. This means we aim to work and network across all faith-based, civil and secular organisations and will advocate for all but are unashamedly part of the global Church and seek to build its resilience as our vision states.

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