

Strengthening resilience among women from Christian minorities

The Strength2Stand approach

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Abstract

This paper considers how the “Strength2Stand” approach can build the resilience of women belonging to Christian minorities. Following a brief overview of resilience based on research in different sectors in international development, it looks at the compound vulnerability of Christian women. Empirical evidence shows the success of the “Strength2Stand” approach. This approach is based on a three-tier pyramid of self-help development steps that are community-based and community-driven. Women can gradually improve their condition and position within their family and community, integrating spiritual, social and economic development in the process of empowerment and resilience building.

Keywords Resilience, compound vulnerability, religious minority, women, Strength2Stand approach.

1. Introduction

Pew Forum research has indicated a recent increase in restrictions on religion. In the last ten years, the number of governments imposing restrictions on religious minorities have risen from 40 to 52. The number of countries where people are experiencing the highest levels of social hostility due to religious diversity has grown from 39 to 56. This trend calls for a focus on strengthening Christian resilience to deal with the growing religious restrictions and social threats.

This paper captures my observations as a development practitioner among Christian minorities. I begin with some general observations on resilience, followed by a presentation of resilience models. I then discuss the problem of compound

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vulnerability for women,² taking into account the intersectionality³ between their position as Christians in their family, as members of a religious minority and (in many cases) as living in poverty. The second section of the paper gives an overview of communal and cultural factors that prevent women from taking the initiative to promote their own development. The third section describes a community development model through which different aspects of the compound vulnerability are addressed, followed by some concluding thoughts.

1.1 Resilience in women belonging to a minority

In my experience, Christian minorities have generally seemed to be inward-looking, lacking positive resilience and strength to deal with the day-to-day challenges they face as a religious minority. This mindset causes them to see themselves as victims and to lose the ability to proactively mitigate negative consequences of pressure and discrimination. This observation triggered my interest in the concept of resilience, as well as my desire to find a model that I could apply to assist Christian minorities, particularly Christian women.

In general, Christian minority women live in a social circle limited to family and church. From childhood onwards, they are told to endure daily pressures and not challenge them, since they are supposed to live as devout, submissive female Christians. This endurance could actually be seen as a form of resilience, helping them cope with daily pressures. However, the pressure to live as submissive women often reduces women's space to develop new capacities outside the routines of daily life. There is no space in their social-relational and emotional realms to gain additional skills or explore new venues in study and employment; hence, no strengthening of resilience occurs. This article looks at one way to build the resilience of Christian women.

1.2 Some examples of a resilient system

The term 'resilience' has become a buzzword in the world of international development and has been used much more often during the last decade. The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) resilience scan⁴ describes the focus on resilience that

² This term is borrowed from Emma Dipper, member of the Gender and Persecution Working group in the International Platform for Religious Freedom. Compound vulnerability is a situation in which systemic or institutional conditions intersect in a manner that creates additional barriers to the agent's ability to develop or achieve well-being, thus adding to the first-order vulnerability.

³ Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how aspects of a person's social and political identities (e.g. gender, sex, race, class, sexuality, religion, ability, physical appearance, height) might combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege.

⁴ Amy Kerbyshire et al., Resilience Scan, July–September 2017 (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2017) Available at: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11966>.

is present in many sectors within the arena of international development, as communities are supported to deal with vulnerabilities such as during recovery after natural disasters, peacebuilding and mediation after civil war, and dealing with persistent poverty.

The ODI has defined resilience as the “ability to anticipate, avoid, plan for, cope with, recover from and adapt to shocks and stresses.”⁵ This means that people can deal with changing circumstances, proactively making the best of each situation they are in. They can bounce back after incidents of discrimination, taking steps to deal with changing realities.

The Resilience Alliance (an international, multidisciplinary research organization that explores the dynamics of human systems) has advanced the understanding and practical application of resilience, bringing in adaptive capacity, and transformation of societies and ecosystems to cope with change and support human well-being. It contends that systems can achieve resilience only within given limits; it represents the amount of change a system can undergo and still retain the same controls of function and structure, including the degree to which a system is capable of self-organization and able to establish or increase its capacity for learning and adaptation. In this view, once a certain threshold has been reached, transformation is needed to obtain a new state of resilience. The notion of moving beyond a threshold is a necessary component in thinking about well-being with regard to change, which could also be called *transformational change* as the goal is for the change to become adopted, sustained and integrated in life. Individual resilience is strongest when integrated with resilience building at the level of an organization, such as a church.

Another model developed to address the lack of resilience is the triple A+T model, developed by Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), which administers British overseas aid.⁶ The first A stands for *anticipate*: train the community

pdf, esp. 9. And ODI, “A comparative overview of resilience measurement frameworks”. Available at: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9754.pdf>.

⁵ Building Resilience and Adaptation to Climate Extremes and Disasters (BRACED) developed the following definition: “If the capacities and assets to deal with various shocks, stresses, uncertainty and change are built and supported, and if drivers of risk are reduced, and if these actions are supported by an enabling environment, then resilience is increased.” See Julia Barrott, “The 3As: Tracking Resilience across BRACED”. Available at: <https://www.weadapt.org/knowledge-base/transforming-development-and-disaster-risk/the-3as-tracking-resilience>. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has defined resilience as “the ability of households, communities and nations to absorb and recover from shocks, whilst positively adapting and transforming their structures and means for living in the face of long-term stresses, change and uncertainty”; OECD, “Guidelines for Resilience Systems Analysis”. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/risk-resilience/>.

⁶ braced.org/about/.

in how to anticipate potential natural hazards or other risks, such as oppression by dominant majority religions. The second A stands for *absorb* – i.e. absorbing shocks or potential changes to individuals or groups that lead to a new situation. The third A signifies that people gain skills and use resources in order to *adapt*. These steps of resilience building lead then to the T, *transformation*, as the community introduces positive changes to deal with the new reality on the ground and to continue from there. People can then bounce forward with an element of optimism, aiming to adopt positive behavior so as to deal more effectively with pressure and discrimination.⁷

The resilience paradigms described above were developed by international development practitioners looking at socio-ecological issues overall; they do not provide an in-depth exploration of resilience building for religious minorities specifically. This paper looks specifically at how the triple A+T and bouncing forward could be appropriated to help Christian women under strain to build their resilience.

1.3 Compound vulnerability for women

A specific focus on women is important because they often face compound vulnerability due to the combination or intersectionality of different factors. First, they face pressure as a result of belonging to a religious minority; second, they often experience inferior status as women within their own family and religious community; third, religious minorities tend to live in poverty, a situation perpetuated by a lack of livelihood options and fewer educational opportunities. All these components together shape the intersectionality framework.

Intersectionality conceptualizes a person, a group or a social problem as affected by a number of forms of discrimination and disadvantages. It takes into account people's overlapping identities and experiences to understand the complexity of prejudices they face. Christian women have different kinds of pressures in the different social circles they move in, such as the general community, their church and their own family, thereby creating compound vulnerability.

Certain vulnerabilities can develop and become intensified due to deeper social-relational patterns and identity issues in society. For example, in Pakistan, social norms perpetuate and magnify the view that women have significantly less value than men. As a result, women risk developing a mindset of worthlessness, leading to a strong, internalized sense of inferiority that grows over a lifetime. But in the same way, resilience can unfold over a lifetime and be strongly influenced by family relationships, such, as those with one's husband or mother-in-law.⁸

⁷ Manyena, S. B. (2009). Disaster resilience in development and humanitarian interventions. University of Northumbria.

⁸ See for instance: Muliha Gull Tara and Venkat Rao Pulla ,2014.'Patriarchy, Gender Violence and Poverty amongst Pakistani Women: A Social Work Inquiry', Int'l Journal of Social Work and Human Services,

Christian women also belong to informal communities, most importantly their (extended) family and church. Many internal and external factors affect these systems: social relationships of power, economic development, cultural traits, customary law and spirituality. These aspects must be considered when one seeks to address women's lack of resilience. In addition, decisions to strengthen resilience depend on personal traits such as perceived urgency, risk perception, cognitive barriers and personal and cultural values. The factors mentioned above are linked together in the social-relational sphere and need to be taken into account during the ongoing endeavour to strengthen resilience.

2. The community impacts Christian women's ability to be resilient

In my work as an international development practitioner, I have often observed patterns of lack of resilience amongst Christian women at the grassroots level, as they feel overwhelmed by daily discrimination and social hostility. Their internalized sense of inferiority, lack of self-confidence, relegation to the lower rungs of the household hierarchy, and lack of knowledge regarding their rights and entitlements prevent them from taking initiative.

Following are some concrete examples of what I have observed within the Christian communities in Egypt, Pakistan and Iraq:

1. A rather strict hierarchy within religious institutions, which leads to an authority gap and barrier between the (usually male) religious authorities and women. This results in the loss of opportunities to develop confidence and leadership skills.
2. A general hesitancy and fear of change of the status quo by people in power: leaders either male or female in position would like to keep their position instead of sharing or delegating power leading to *a halt of* change initiatives.
3. A Pakistani colleague confirmed that she is being influenced by the majority religion. She has unconsciously integrated part of the majority religion's culture within her own attitudes and behaviours. This includes the submissive role of women, the custom to men enjoying their meal before the women, and a conservative dress code. The non-Christian influences are accepted, and steps to address their inroads in the Christian culture are not seen as important.
4. Individuals are caught in the customary system of the local culture where change is not welcomed. Girls and women are expected to be compliant and go with the flow, for it "always has been like this and it will always continue as it is." Individuals do not like to stand out from the crowd; for instance, girls are

not encouraged to start a micro-business, to be in charge of their own income-generating activity, or to pursue higher education.

5. Decisions are often limited by the decisions one has made in the past, or by their experience up to that date, even though circumstances might have changed and past experiences may no longer be relevant. For example, a family may have moved to a more secure environment, however their daughters still do not receive permission to attend school beyond grade 8, even though security cannot be given as reason anymore.
6. Families where sons and daughters-in-law live with parents are often in a situation where the younger generation is hesitant to change habits so as to not offend their parents. As a result, women are further restricted from taking initiative to change. As one colleague told me, "My mother-in-law passed away; I now have freedom."
7. The oppressed accept their position and even self-perpetuate it by developing false beliefs of blame with sentences such as: "I should not have been there," "Why did I take this job?" and so on.
8. This mindset and belief cause women to treat the oppression they face as an excuse not to take action to change their situation. They willingly, probably unconsciously, become victimized, explaining their passivity by saying, "I cannot do that, as I am a woman. I don't have a man speaking for me. How can I raise my voice?"
9. Lack of assertiveness and ability to say no, low self-confidence, and self-doubt. These points illustrate a variety of factors that must be considered when we support Christian women in addressing their position or their condition of vulnerability. Most of the factors are internal. Many external factors are present as well, such as support for income-generating activities to raise Christians out of poverty or advocating for political inclusion. However, these external factors are beyond the scope of this paper.

3. A suggested approach: Strength2Stand groups

How, then, can Christian women develop resilience despite their compound vulnerabilities and the resistance they experience in their community? How can they anticipate, absorb and adapt in response to their daily pressures? One suggested approach is Strength2Stand (S2S), introduced in Pakistan and Egypt by the UK organization Release International beginning in 2014. It is a self-help approach with a three-tier structure through which people come to realize that they can help themselves to achieve the economic, social and leadership goals they define.

The first tier in S2S is the presence of women's groups where the focus is on personal and family development. At the second tier, representatives of these S2S

groups form an association, which focuses on changes within their own community. The third tier is formed by representatives of these associations, who come together to advocate for changes in the position of Christian women.

The main pillars of S2S are that (1) everyone is created in the image of God, and therefore we are all unique and worthy; (2) we all are created with different gifts and capacities; and (3) together we are strong; it is possible to create demand-making power through coordination and cooperation.

The S2S group functions as a place where women develop the skills and discipline necessary to conduct a meeting, collect savings, guide a discussion. In addition, as a safe space, they reflect on family relationships, learn about responsibility and accountability and care for each other. The most vulnerable are selected through criteria set by church leaders and/or community members themselves. Weekly meetings of 15 to 20 women living in the same neighborhood strengthen social cohesion. An external facilitator focuses on capacity building according to a curriculum through which the S2S group members learn to focus on spiritual growth, economic development and a process of empowerment. They also learn how to address cases of discrimination and oppression.

All group meetings start with devotions, prayer and a discussion of how to apply the biblical message in daily life. Group members take turns leading the devotions, thus building the capacity to read the Bible and to guide a basic discussion on the content of the reading. These skills assist the members to look at their own situation, discussing how they can adapt in order to mitigate harmful conditions. For instance, a devotion on Abigail's actions to avoid David's wrath conveys the message that women should step up to stop harmful events if needed, just as Abigail anticipated how David would respond and acted accordingly.

The meetings continue with discussion of social issues. Ideally, the topic of the devotion is linked to the social issue under consideration, such as relationships with spouses, parents and children, education, literacy or health issues. Members learn how to adapt so as to avoid harmful situations – for example, to avoid certain inflammatory words such as 'equality,' as many men in their families do not accept women as equal partners. Women stress the importance of respect, following the example of Jesus' respect for women.

As Christian women commonly face compound vulnerability, this approach aims to address different aspects of vulnerability, including economic poverty. Empirical evidence from Sudan, Pakistan and Egypt shows that S2S helps Christian women learn to take the initiative to support each other, to start income-generating activity and to advise each other on how to deal with tension within family relationships. Playing a role in efforts to make ends meet for the family enhances self-confidence and decreases the strong, internalized sense of inferiority.

Once the S2S group has developed the capacity to function on its own, the external facilitator transitions out and members lead the groups themselves. At this point (the programme's second tier) representatives are selected to lead an association. Within the association, members discuss ways to anticipate daily pressures and how to adapt to them so as to protect their own dignity and that of their loved ones in the community. Representatives focus on strategies to strengthen the process of empowerment for S2S group members.

At this level of operation, S2S members in Sudan claimed a decision-making role within the church. In Egypt, S2S members claimed physical space within the church as a meeting location. Stronger S2S groups requested the priest to facilitate group meetings for their husbands and brothers to enable a process where the men could also discuss issues important for them.

This process becomes still stronger at the third level, called the federation, where members learn how to lobby and advocate to transform the mindset of society (external factors). At the third tier, members are equipped to play a significant role in producing systemic change – perhaps examining aspects of prejudice in the educational system, promoting gender equality, addressing unequal power relationships within the family and church, or facilitating a process by which religious leaders include women in decision-making processes. The goal is to establish an enabling environment where women can develop their abilities, thrive and rejoice as daughters of God, created in His image. This level has not been reached yet within the communities where I have worked and observed S2S.

S2S is a good start towards building female church members' confidence, self-esteem and social cohesion so that they support each other in strengthening their capabilities.⁹ This process alone, however, is insufficient by itself to cause sustainable change. Ideally, S2S should be complemented by other capacity-building initiatives to produce transformational change at both the individual and community levels. For instance, Pakistan is currently pioneering male S2S groups, for young men in the same villages and communities where female S2S groups are also meeting. The objective is to discuss similar topics in both groups, fostering a process of building dignified relationships between men and women and eventually leading to more equal gender relationships.

⁹ See Sabina Alkire and Séverine Deneulin, 2009. 'The Human Development and Capability Approach' in Deneulin, Séverine and Lila Shahani (eds.) *An Introduction to the Human Development and Capability Approach*. London: Earthscan, pp. 22-48. The capability approach contains three central concepts: functioning, capability and agency. Functioning refers to being or doing what people value and have reason to value. A capability signifies a person's freedom to enjoy various functionings – to be or do things that contribute to their well-being. Agency is one's ability to pursue and realize goals he or she values and has reason to value. The capability approach is multi-dimensional, because several things matter at the same time. Well-being cannot be reduced to income, happiness or any other single thing.

Christian communities need to support each other and to develop protective mechanisms to protect their dignity and value, which could include very simple measures such as walking girls to school to prevent them from being harassed. In addition, they can develop a sense of discernment, learn to interpret their cultural situation, be proactive and discover new ways to strengthen their own community.

4. Conclusion and the way forward

How does one go forward in building resilience amongst minority Christian women and their communities? Christians and their communities must take multiple factors and development strategies into account when addressing women's lack of resilience. Women have a tremendous influence over their children, particularly in societies (like most of those I have visited) where they are seen as traditional caretakers. Strong, resilient Christian women serving as caretakers can guide and support their family members to deal with pressures in life. However, this is a long process that must be complemented by other initiatives.

The three-tier structure of Strength2Stand gradually builds women's capacity and skill to anticipate, absorb and adapt in the midst of pressures and discrimination. It has a strong focus on equipping women and girls to influence children and male family members. This mutually supportive social network in which Christian women share with and learn from each other is a valuable first step.

It is essential to strengthen the resilience of minority Christian groups as persecution is likely to increase in the foreseeable future. The S2S approach alone is insufficient in enabling minority women to realize their full worth. A comprehensive, systemic approach is needed for these women to truly move beyond becoming victims, and for the community at large to truly become resilient. People in positions of authority play a strong role in promoting inclusiveness and the acceptance of Christian women as precious children of God. Moving forward, further steps could involve the following:

- breaking down those elements in the power hierarchy that hinder development (including the church hierarchy);
- building the capacity to discern non-biblical influences in the church and Christian community;
- strengthening the self-esteem and confidence of women and girls, as well as marginalized male members; and
- developing skills to proactively protect oneself and other women and girls.

It is about time to build up resilience within Christian minorities!