

# Highlighting the dark corners of persecution

Using the Open Doors World Watch List as a basis

Thomas Müller, Frans Veerman and Matthew D. Rees<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

World Watch Research has for many years been gathering data about different types of hostilities against Christians. Traditionally these data were used to guide Open Doors (OD) field work, as well as by Open Doors Offices, mainly to sensitize Christian constituencies, encourage them to pray and give for the ‘persecuted Church’. More recently, the data have been used more broadly by different groups of users. This article describes how World Watch List (WWL) data have helped to highlight under-researched topics concerning persecuted Christians. It also gives an example how OD’s office in the United Kingdom used the data to improve its advocacy work.

**Keywords** World Watch List, persecution engines, drivers of persecution, advocacy, conversion, gender dimension of persecution, persecution eclipse.

World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International,<sup>2</sup> has been gathering data about different types of hostilities against Christians for many years. Traditionally, these data have guided Open Doors (OD) project work and have been used by OD offices around the world, mainly to sensitize their Christian constituencies and encourage them to pray and give financial support for the “persecuted Church.” In more recent years, WWR’s work has received broader attention, for several reasons. First, OD offices have been able to reach the secular public more extensively, as journalists have reported more often on the situation of Christians. Second, OD Advocacy has more actively used the data in the political sphere. Third, the data have been analysed by OD experts looking for patterns of gender-specific persecution. Fourth, WWR team members have presented the data to other religious freedom professionals.

In this article, we briefly describe how World Watch List (WWL) data have helped to highlight under-researched topics concerning persecuted Christians (in

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<sup>2</sup> Though it is affiliated with Open Doors, World Watch Research’s findings are independent. They can be found at <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/> (Password: freedom).

this article referred to as “dark corners of persecution”). We also explain how OD’s office in the United Kingdom used the data to improve its advocacy work. We attempt to identify lessons learned and discuss how to increase the positive impact of WWL research on behalf of the “persecuted Church.”

## 1. The World Watch List

The WWL is one of the few comprehensive annual research projects authored by a non-state actor on the status of freedom of religion worldwide. It focuses on the situation of Christians and is published as a ranking of 73 countries with corresponding country dossiers,<sup>3</sup> detailing the situation of Christians in each country.

The underlying research follows a detailed methodology, which has at its heart a questionnaire with 84 questions grouped in six spheres (five spheres of life and violence).<sup>4</sup> Those spheres of life follow the guarantees of freedom of religion stipulated in Article 18 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration on Human Rights and Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The five spheres are private life (in freedom of religion terminology, usually *forum internum*), family life, community life, national life and church life (comprising the collective dimension of freedom of religion). Violence frequently occurs across all spheres.

But these are just the core questions respondents and the WWR team should answer. At least as important for a good understanding of any given country are the systemic questions about a country’s persecution engines, its drivers of persecution, and the categories and geographic spread of its Christian communities. Adding in general questions, such as ones on a country’s political, economic, social and technological situation, a total of 126 questions should be answered, painting a detailed picture of the situation on the ground.

WWR categorises nine persecution engines; although, in practice, the various sources of persecution are often blended, usually one engine is dominant. The nine engines are Islamic oppression, religious nationalism, ethno-religious hostility, clan oppression, Christian denominational protectionism, communist and post-communist oppression, secular intolerance, dictatorial paranoia, and organized corruption and crime.

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<sup>3</sup> On the question of whether freedom of religion can be measured at all and different options for doing so, see Anja Hoffmann, “Measuring Freedom of Religion: An Analysis of Religious Freedom Indexes,” MA thesis, University of Vienna, 2017. For the 2020 World Watch List, see the Compilation of main documents, last revision 15 January 2020. The 2020 list had 73 countries, but the number varies from year to year, as all countries scoring at least 41 points on the WWL rating system are included. The individual country dossiers for WWL 2020 were updated in February/March 2020, the 74 country dossiers for WWL 2021 were updated February/March 2021.

<sup>4</sup> The complete WWL methodology has been updated in October 2020.

WWR has also developed a list of twelve drivers, including not just typical actors of persecution such as state authorities and religious radical groups, but also persecutors that may not initially be recognized as such: political parties, ordinary citizens or one's own immediate or extended family. As with the engines, usually more than one driver of persecution is active, leading to what could be called a persecution matrix.

Finally, it is important to determine who is actually being persecuted. Therefore, four categories of Christian communities have been distinguished: communities of expatriate Christians (including migrant workers), historical Christian communities and/or government-controlled churches, converts to Christianity and non-traditional Christian communities. In any given country, different engines and persecutors may be targeting different categories of Christian communities. Furthermore, the situation within a country can vary by region, adding additional complexity.<sup>5</sup>

Respondents to the questionnaire are experts who are independent of OD and the WWR analyst. All answers are fed into the scoring process<sup>6</sup> that results in the production of the WWL. In addition, the information is reflected in the picture of persecution explained and detailed in country dossiers. The complete WWL 2020 documentation encompasses approximately 2,500 pages of text when one also counts general articles on trends, violence and statistics along with an audit statement. This documentation should be taken into account when evaluating a country's score or position on the list.

Given this wealth of information, it is not surprising that the interest in the data provided has grown exponentially and reaches beyond traditional Christian constituencies, although these are still an important target group. The WWL remains a valid and important way of transmitting information to facilitate prayer and support, but its applications have expanded considerably beyond this task, especially when used in combination with the country dossiers. In the past, mainly Christian media were reporting on the persecution of Christians; in recent years, the situation of Christians worldwide has attracted increasing interest in secular media as well. The type of reporting varies from basic overviews to human interest stories that support advocacy for those at risk. Meanwhile, politicians have also been showing more interest in the topic,<sup>7</sup> although this interest has not necessarily translated into action on behalf of persecuted Christians.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see the country dossiers on Ethiopia, update February 2020; Myanmar, update February 2020; or China, update February 2020.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed explanation of the scoring process, see p. 36 of the complete WWL methodology, updated October 2020.

<sup>7</sup> The 2020 WWL was launched – amongst other places – in the European Parliament, with 70 people attending, including eight members of the parliament; 123 MPs attended the presentation in the Uni-

## 2. The dark corners of persecution

One of the most practical results of this increase in research and corresponding interest is the discovery of what could be called the dark corners of persecution against Christians – situations which are rarely highlighted or even mentioned in any media reporting. The wealth of data gathered in the process of compiling the annual list contributes not only to a better understanding of the situation and persecution patterns, but also to identifying groups that are especially vulnerable to persecution. Many of these groups were rarely the subject of reporting, due to lack of knowledge, lack of available data, or other reasons.

### 2.1 The situation of Christian converts

No matter who drives persecution or the motives behind it, converts to Christianity are bearing the brunt of persecution all over the world, across all categories of drivers and engines. People are converting to Christianity in countries where religion plays a major role in daily life (such as many Muslim countries, Hindu India or Buddhist Myanmar and Sri Lanka) and also in Communist countries such as Vietnam and China. Often in these countries, established churches (both Catholic or Protestant) do not dare to support converts or even have contact with them, since they are perceived as apostates and enemies of society.<sup>8</sup> Even the decision to convert from one Christian denomination to another can invoke persecution.<sup>9</sup>

Converts frequently prefer to keep their decision as private and secret as possible, fearing the harsh consequences<sup>10</sup> should their conversion become known to family, friends or the wider community. The WWL data show that converts not only face social pressure to return to their old faith but may be excluded from their families, forced to leave the village, deprived of their livelihood or even killed with impunity. This is one reason why converts do not show up in most statistics published by religious organizations or state authorities. A politically motivated under-reporting of Christians in many government censuses adds to this bias.<sup>11</sup> Acknowledging a

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ted Kingdom, 40 in France, and 16 in Sweden. A launch was also held in the Italian parliament for the first time, and the results were presented to the Danish parliament as well.

<sup>8</sup> See the in-depth study of conversion and apostasy in Christine Schirmacher, *Let there be no Compulsion in Religion (Sura 2:256): Apostasy from Islam as Judged by Contemporary Islamic Theologians* (Bonn VKW, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> This is the case in Ethiopia, for example; see the country dossier on Ethiopia, update February 2020 (especially the section on the private sphere), although such an inter-denominational change could perhaps be better distinguished from conversion by using another term.

<sup>10</sup> For details, see the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's overview on (anti-)conversion laws from December 2018.

<sup>11</sup> This is believed to have been the case with the 2014 government census in Myanmar; see country dossier Myanmar, update February 2020, pp. 11-12, or the 2017 government census in Pakistan; see country dossier Pakistan, update February 2020, pp. 10 and 13.

higher number of Christians would embolden radical groups or support narratives by majoritarian groups that their religion, culture and very being are threatened by the Christian minority. Furthermore, Christian converts are unlikely to self-identify as such when enumerators deployed by the state come to visit. Therefore, converts prefer to stay in their “dark corner”, not out of shame over their faith but out of self-protection. WWR receives hundreds of testimonies of this sort from converts all over the world every year, although for security reasons it is often not possible to publish details.

Converts are far outnumbered by other categories of Christians in most countries on the WWL (though there are exceptions, such as Iran). However, even though small in number, their situation is so different from that of other Christians – and their experience of lack of freedom of religion is so pronounced and multifaceted – that they should be treated as a separate category. Through its published research, WWR directs light into this dark corner of persecution and provides at least some of the data needed to enable an increased level of reporting.

WWR’s in-depth research into the situation of converts has benefitted OD’s advocacy work. For instance, OD UK and Ireland has responded for many years to requests for support from Christians living in the UK who are facing forced return to a WWL country. For these individuals, the advocacy team provides a letter outlining the dangers for a Christian living in that country, which can be used in the individual’s appeal for the right to remain in the UK. Having detailed and accurate research on the location and situation of converts in countries where Christians are persecuted has made these letters crucial in protecting extremely vulnerable Christians from being sent back to high-risk situations in their home countries. OD’s research has enabled these letters to provide a nuanced account of Christian’s experience in these countries, highlighting the added danger for converts (as well as other vulnerable groups such as women, Christians of a lower caste and children).

In October 2019, OD Germany published a report on the situation of 6,516 converts who had fled to that country, many of whom were at risk of being sent back to countries such as Iran or Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> The report was based on WWR research and triggered discussions with the relevant authorities.

## 2.2 The situation of women

Another dark corner of persecution which quickly emerged through OD’s research was the situation of women. What may appear to be a societal problem at first glance (since, in many societies, women are relegated to an inferior status by fam-

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<sup>12</sup> Report “Schutz für Konvertiten vor Abschiebung in Länder mit Christenverfolgung – Erhebung zur Situation von 6.516 Konvertiten in Deutschland“, October 2019, only available in German.

ily, community and religious authorities and are more prone to discrimination) is in fact a problem that affects freedom of religion and belief as well. That is because along with women's inferior status in society comes an additional layer of vulnerability if they are members of a Christian minority.<sup>13</sup> Affiliation with a minority faith adds to their already existing challenges and frequently leads to discrimination from communities that react in a hostile and derogatory manner to a religion perceived as alien or Western. This double vulnerability can even become a triple vulnerability if the woman is a convert to Christianity, especially when she is the first or only one in her family or community. In such cases, the woman's only way to escape persecution would be to leave her residence, an option rarely available for economic reasons. In many cultures, women have no opportunity to travel or live on their own, separated from their family.

Double vulnerability appears across all categories of persecution engines and countries, but is most pronounced in countries where Islamic oppression is the dominant engine. When the 2018 WWL was launched, pilot studies on this topic were published for six countries: the Central African Republic, Colombia (where the double vulnerability is not related to Islamic oppression), Egypt, Ethiopia, Iraq and Nigeria.<sup>14</sup> For the 2019 WWL, a more systematic analytical approach was applied, and with the 2020 WWL a full report on gender-specific religious persecution (GSRP) was published,<sup>15</sup> based on the data WWR is gathering annually. For the first time, this report also identified typical gender-specific situations of persecution, called "pressure points."

It is much harder to determine the levels of pressure and discrimination faced by women than to gather data on violence, because women face discrimination not only from civil authorities but also from family and society. Gender-based discrimination is a much more everyday phenomenon and often taken for granted, to the extent that its victims do not even think about it. Therefore, considerably fewer reports are available. Finally, discrimination is often perceived as a source of shame, especially when it comes from within one's own family. For these reasons, the main publicly reported pressure point of persecution for women is not discrimination, but sexual violence;<sup>16</sup> for men, it is physical violence. The report does not stop with

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<sup>13</sup> In two-thirds of the top 50 countries on the 2020 WWL, Christians are a minority of not more than 5 percent of the population, and in many cases the percentage is much less than that.

<sup>14</sup> Country reports "Compound structural vulnerabilities facing Christian women under pressure for their faith", November 2018; available for Central African Republic; Colombia; Egypt; Ethiopia; Iraq and Nigeria (revised version from April 2019)

<sup>15</sup> See Report "2020 Gender-specific religious persecution", February 2020 (abbreviated: GSRP report 2020).

<sup>16</sup> GSRP report 2020, p. 9.

reporting violence, as an example about the experience of female Christians in Myanmar makes clear:

Women, especially when belonging to ethnic or religious minorities, are at the mercy of military personnel, and are vulnerable to assault. Unconfirmed reports indicate that military men are encouraged to marry Christian women and convert them to Buddhism, incentivized by the promise of money or a promotion in rank. Some women report feeling resigned to this fate and see entering such marriages as a way to escape dire poverty and insecurity.

Reports also indicate that Christian women in Kachin State are being trafficked to China to become “brides,” where they are raped with the aim of impregnating them.<sup>17</sup>

Another example with very different persecution dynamics is Nigeria:

In north-east Nigeria and in the Nigerian Middle Belt, the gender component of the attacks and suffering of Christian women and girls is almost in a class of its own. Raids by Boko Haram, and its splinter group ISWAP in north-east Nigeria, along with Fulani herdsmen in the Middle Belt (and even some southern states), have terrorized Christian communities, captured their women and sexually abused them, forced some to be sex slaves, killed some and still collected ransom money for them. The desire to depopulate Christian-dominated territory has brought about an increase in abduction and forced marriage of Christian girls. Married Christian women are victims of this, too. In extreme circumstances, teenage girls are being recruited by force to be used as suicide bombers.<sup>18</sup>

Underscoring the fact that pressure is harder to track than violence, it is much more difficult to give comprehensive reports about forced divorces or incarceration by families – which rank third and fifth, respectively, among the most common findings related to women in the top 50 WWL countries – as these actions usually occur in private. Nevertheless, those findings have highlighted the double vulnerability of Christian women to persecution and have enabled advocacy strategies (for example in the UK) to be better targeted.

The decision to include gender-based questions as part of the WWR questionnaire has been a great asset for OD’s strategic advocacy with the UK government. This research has provided opportunities to discuss the specific vulnerability of Christian women and has allowed OD to collaborate with other NGOs working in

<sup>17</sup> GSRP report 2020, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> GSRP report 2020, p. 15.

this area. One such NGO is BRAC UK, which seeks to address the specific vulnerability of Rohingya women who are, like Christian women in northern Nigeria or Myanmar, targeted on the basis of their gender and persecuted for their faith. Together, both NGOs have campaigned to have the specific vulnerability of women from minority faith communities recognized within the UK's Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict initiative (PSVI). This campaigning has taken various forms, from a joint submission to the International Development Select Committee to exhibiting together at conferences. Identifying the intersection of faith and gender has provided OD with the ability to build new coalitions with organizations OD would not traditionally have worked with.

Furthermore, the gender-based research has provided OD with new advocacy methods. In 2018, OD took the artist Hannah Rose Thomas to northern Nigeria to visit a trauma centre run by partners of OD. Here, women who have experienced violence at the hands of Boko Haram and Fulani herdsman receive creative "trauma care." As part of a week-long workshop, Thomas helped each of the women to paint a self-portrait. For many, this was the first time they had held a paint brush or written their own name. On returning, Hannah then painted her own portrait of each of the women. These portraits, alongside the self-portraits, have been used for advocacy purposes and have been displayed at the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in Westminster Abbey, as part of an exhibition designed to influence the PSVI, and at the One Young World conference in London.

Engaging with art as advocacy has provided OD UK and Ireland with a method by which to reach new audiences. For instance, presenting the art at the FCO provided space for continued discussion on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) and PSVI (a strategic goal for OD), and exhibiting at the One Young World conference offered exposure to an international development audience, something OD sees as a strategic priority going forward. Furthermore, the art itself produces an emotional response from decision makers which words and statistics cannot produce. Hence, it opens a new way of discussing persecution of Christians with them.

### **2.3 Persecution eclipse**

"Persecution eclipse" is another "dark corner" found by WWR which is not connected to a certain group of persons, but to the overall situation in a country. This term describes a situation where persecution and a general crisis overlap to the extent that the former appears to be overshadowed or rendered almost invisible by the latter. The danger here is that all attention and efforts to mitigate the situation are focused on the general crisis and the non-religious reasons for it, leaving the religious persecution unaddressed. Persecution eclipse typically occurs in four contexts.



### 2.3.1 One-sided interpretation of civil conflict

Persecution eclipse arises when specific events are wrongly or one-sidedly interpreted. Nigeria provides a clear example, as a country with an alarming record of religiously related violence. Is the violence taking place in the country actually persecution or just civil unrest? Is there an agenda of Islamization or is it just about economic issues, environmental degradation and migration? A paper published by World Watch Monitor in June 2013, argues that this is a classic example of persecution eclipse.<sup>19</sup> Additional detailed reports on fact-finding missions in the Nigerian Middle Belt further illustrate this pattern.<sup>20</sup>

Another example of one-sided interpretation is the situation of the Christian population in Kachin State and Northern Shan State in Myanmar.<sup>21</sup> The Kachin have been striving for independence and/or autonomy since the 1950s. The fact that Kachin fighters regularly clash with the Burmese army has overshadowed the fact that Christian churches and schools have frequently been shelled, Christian teachers have been killed, pastors have been arrested and thousands of Kachin Christians are still displaced in the region and have been deliberately cut off from receiving aid.

The fact that Border Guard Forces (BGF) are also drivers of persecution blurs the picture. These are armed groups operating alongside the Burmese army, recruited from other ethnic minorities. Furthermore, the Myanmar army, politicians, insurgents and BGF all participate to varied degrees in the trade of precious stones, timber and drugs. As the leader of the Kachin Baptist Convention, Dr. Hkalam Samson, stated in September 2019, all sides of the conflict are simply benefitting too much from the current status quo and do not really seem interested in peace.<sup>22</sup> Amidst the concerns over an insurgency, economic problems and corruption, the underlying religious reasons for mistreatment of innocent persons to be overlooked.

### 2.3.2 Oversee initial phases of a conflict

Persecution eclipse also arises when conflicts receive international attention after their initial phases. One example is Boko Haram in Nigeria. In its early phases (after its resurrection in 2010), Boko Haram killed government personnel (including security forces) and Christians. Whereas government personnel (whether Muslims or Christians) were killed because they were linked to the government, Christians were killed because of

<sup>19</sup> Report "Nigeria: persecution or civil unrest?", 2013.

<sup>20</sup> See all 12 reports focusing on Nigeria under the headline "WWR Analysis – FOCUS NIGERIA: 2013-2018" at the tab "Reports".

<sup>21</sup> The paragraphs on Myanmar have been finalized before the military coup on 1 February 2021 took place.

<sup>22</sup> "No peace in Myanmar without sacrifices: Kachin Christian chief"; Interview in *The Irawaddy*, 18 September 2019.

their faith. When the international community began to notice the situation, the conflict had already spread to include Muslims not associated with Boko Haram.

Another example comes from the Central African Republic. In 2012 and 2013, Christians were violently persecuted by Islamic Séléka militants on their way to gaining power in Bangui, the nation's capital. International attention arose when the so-called anti-Balaka forces (seen by some as a Christian militia) started to commit revenge attacks on Muslims in Bangui. The origin of the conflict was then quickly forgotten, and nearly the entire blame was placed on the allegedly Christian militia.

### 2.3.3 Culture of violence

Another form of persecution eclipse occurs when organized crime leads to a culture of violence in society that extends beyond the most radical criminal groups. Gangs consisting of youth who saw their fathers and sometimes mothers leave home to go abroad for paid work sometimes step into the criminal opportunities left open by organized crime groups, partly for easy gain and partly in their search for belonging. This situation is common in several Latin American countries. Since these criminal groups and gangs often operate at the level of the local community, local churches, pastors and members are seriously threatened when they try to put their faith into practice by offering youths alternatives to a gang career through education or training. Church leaders and professionals, in particular, are targeted where they stand up for Christian values in violent societies. It is often assumed that they are being targeted for socio-political reasons, not due to their faith, but it is very difficult to separate the two in such circumstances.

### 2.3.4 National disaster: COVID-19

Finally, persecution eclipse can happen when, during national or international crises such as COVID-19, attention shifts away from hostilities against minority religious groups and completely focuses on the new crisis at hand. In the shadow of such a crisis, persecution can take place in houses, in local communities and even at the state level without being noticed. The crisis could even be purposefully exploited as an opportunity for additional persecution. Anecdotal evidence is available on these consequences of COVID-19, but more research is necessary before conclusions can be drawn.<sup>23</sup>

## 3. Conclusion

This article has sought to highlight the so-called “dark corners” of persecution that WWR has identified while gathering and processing data about the situation of

<sup>23</sup> For instance, state aid is sometimes provided only to members of the majority religion, or Christian nurses and medical personnel have been placed at the forefront in treating infected patients. For example, see country dossier Pakistan WWL 2021, updated February 2021, pp. 7 and 42.

Christians around the world. In addition to determining that the plight of certain groups, such as converts and women, has been under-reported and not sufficiently understood, WWR also found that religious persecution can be partly or totally eclipsed by other factors in crisis situations. More broadly, the research provides a glimpse into the complexity and volatility of persecution in countries around the world today.

More research is needed to achieve a better understanding. Since persecution for religious reasons is as old as the Bible (and even predates it), one might assume that there are no further discoveries to be made. However, new phenomena such as the persecution eclipse are being discovered. Understanding these phenomena will help to better support the persecuted, inform prayer supporters and donors, assist media reporting, and advocate effectively to politicians. WWR is committed – together with all the other contributors to this volume and others – to supplying this crucial research.

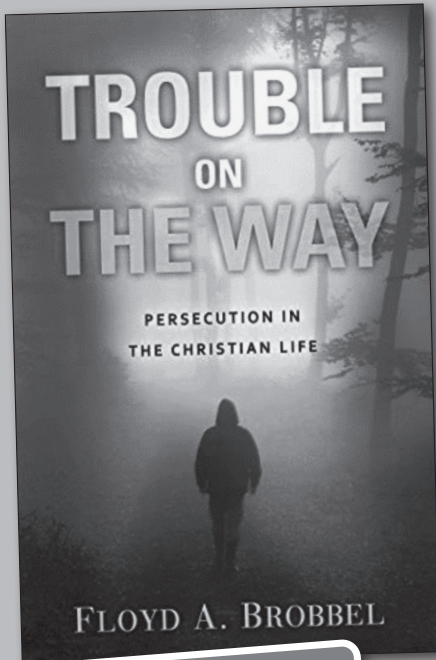
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