



# HEAR HER CRIES

**The kidnapping, forced  
conversion and sexual victimisation  
of Christian women and girls**



Aid to the  
Church in Need

ACN IRELAND

PONTIFICAL  
FOUNDATION





Aid to the  
Church in Need

ACN IRELAND



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*Hear Her Cries* by John Pontifex, Dr. John Newton and Fionn Shiner.

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# At a glance findings

**IN EGYPT**, UNDER-REPORTING AND OFFICIAL DENIALS MAKE THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM IMPOSSIBLE TO ASSESS, BUT RESEARCH REVEALS NUMEROUS CASES OF:

- **FORCED KIDNAPPING**
- **WOMEN ENTICED INTO RELATIONSHIPS AND EXPLOITED.**

**WIDESPREAD UNDER-REPORTING OF FORCED CONVERSION AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE MEANS THE FULL SCALE OF THE CRISIS IS LARGELY HIDDEN.**

DESPITE INCOMPLETE DATA, **SUFFICIENT EVIDENCE** SHOWS **ATROCITIES** AGAINST CHRISTIAN WOMEN AND GIRLS ARE **SO SERIOUS** AS TO RANK AS A **HUMAN RIGHTS CATASTROPHE.**

**RESEARCH INDICATES  
CHRISTIANS MAKE UP**

**95%**

**OF WOMEN AND GIRLS HELD BY  
ISLAMIST EXTREMISTS IN NIGERIA.**

**VICTIMS AND THEIR FAMILIES**  
REMAIN SILENT FEARING:

- **SOCIAL SHAME**
  - **THREATS FROM ABDUCTORS**
- IN OTHER SCENARIOS,  
AUTHORITIES SILENCE VICTIMS  
(E.G. POLICE TELL THEM NOT  
TO TALK).

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AT ITS MOST **EXTREME**, THE  
**FORCED CONVERSION** OF  
CHRISTIAN WOMEN AND  
GIRLS CAN BE **CLASSIFIED AS**  
**GENOCIDE** – JIHADISTS TARGET  
THEM INTENDING TO **DESTROY**  
**MINORITY FAITH COMMUNITIES.**

**IN CONFLICT**  
**SITUATIONS** – SUCH  
AS THE ISLAMIST  
INSURGENCIES IN THE  
**MIDDLE EAST AND**  
**PARTS OF AFRICA** –  
MINORITY WOMEN  
SUFFER HIGHER  
RATES OF SEXUAL  
EXPLOITATION.

**IN PAKISTAN, RESEARCH SUGGESTS**  
**CHRISTIANS COULD COMPRISE UP TO**

**70%**

**OF WOMEN AND GIRLS FORCIBLY**  
**CONVERTED AND MARRIED.**



# Foreword by Maira Shahbaz

*I was walking near my home in Madina Town, in Pakistan's Punjab Province one afternoon when some suspicious-looking men approached me.*

*As a 14-year-old Christian girl in a country where non-Muslims suffer harassment, I was frightened. The men dragged me into a car and blindfolded me.*



I was tortured and raped. It was recorded and a movie was made of it. I was blackmailed. I was forced to sign a certificate to show I had converted and had married my abductor. I was told that if I refused, my family would be killed. When my mother went to the police to get me back, the matter went before Lahore High Court.


The court ruled in my abductor's favour and I was sent back to live with him. Two weeks later, at midnight, I ran away and went to the police. I confirmed that I was a Christian. But the police supported my opponent, the man who had abducted me and who was threatening to kill me. My abductor and his supporters – which include members of the hard-line Islamic party Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan – called for me to be killed. My whole family – my mother, my sisters, my brother and I – are in hiding, locked in a room. Suspects have been spotted in the area asking about us.

I know there are so many other girls and young women, not only Christians but those from other faiths too, who suffer abduction, rape, forced conversion and marriage, not just in Pakistan but in many other countries around the world. **Who will help us? Who will speak up for us? Who cares about our situation?**

Thanks so much to Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) and the many thousands of people who have done their best to help us and protect us. I am grateful for your prayers. I am also grateful for the release of this report *Hear Her Cries: The kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimisation of Christian women and girls*. Please read the report and listen to the Christian girls and women who are kidnapped and who are forced to change their religion and get married.

**FOR TOO LONG, THE WORLD HAS  
REMAINED SILENT.**

# Overview



**Can you imagine what it is like being a mother and knowing these terrible things are being done to your daughter? What is perhaps even worse is realising there is absolutely nothing you can do about it – and all because of the Faith we profess.**

In a country where religious minorities are treated as second-class citizens, following Christ puts girls and women at risk of being targeted for sex by predators who force their victims to marry them and convert.

These are the words of a Christian mother speaking to Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) about the kidnapping, forced marriage and forced conversion of her daughter – a girl barely in her teens. Deeply distressed by the sexual enslavement to which her daughter was subjected, the woman begged us not to reveal their identities or whereabouts for fear of retaliation from extremist groups.

This is just one of many reports we at ACN receive first-hand from project partners and other sources in key countries of concern. Week in, week out, cases are reported to us where girls and young women from Christian families are forced into sexual slavery and religious conversion – often on pain of death.

Hear Her Cries: The kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimisation of Christian women and girls also responds to growing awareness among human rights observers and persecution watchdog organisations that this topic is increasingly urgent. While, as Dr. Ewelina Ochab stated, “the problem continues to be neglected”,<sup>1</sup> particularly in many

countries with poor human rights records and especially concerning women and religious freedom, the issue is beginning to gain traction in the West. Significantly, recommendation five of the July 2019 Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the UK Foreign Secretary of Foreign and Commonwealth Office Support for Persecuted Christians set out the need to:

*“Bolster research into the critical intersection of [Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB)] and minority rights with broader human rights issues (such as people trafficking, gender equality, gender-based violence, especially kidnapping, forced conversion and forced marriage).”<sup>2</sup>*

Hear Her Cries was conceived in response to this proposal, noting that the Truro report stated that its recommendations “should be reviewed independently” in July 2022.<sup>3</sup> The problem, however, is that examining the topic of sexual violence and persecution of faith minorities is far from straightforward. While there is growing consensus about the need for research into the nature and scale of religious and sexual coercion of women, the challenges of setting about the task have been consistently highlighted in studies on the subject. One report described the matter as “complex, violent and hidden”.<sup>4</sup>

Social pressure, including the fear of casting shame on the family, and the threat of reprisal from abductors and their accomplices, are among the factors com-

monly cited in explaining the difficulties of investigating the issue. That said, growing awareness of women's rights suggests the need for research into whether any increase in cases is primarily the result of better reporting, with more victims and their families coming forward, or if there is an underlying rise in the incidence rate itself. To date, evidence points more towards the latter. In April, ACN's Religious Freedom in the World report 2021, which assesses the situation for faith groups in 196 countries, concluded in its 'Main Findings': “Crimes against girls and women abducted, raped and obliged to change their faith in forced conversions, were recorded in a growing number of countries.”<sup>5</sup> The report also described “the increasing number of these violations”.<sup>6</sup>

Incidents of Christian women being forced to marry against their will were reported as present in 90 percent of the 50 countries included in the 2021 edition of Open Doors' persecution World Watch List. Assessing key factors of concern, such as forced marriage and sexual and other physical violence, the organisation's study on gender-specific religious persecution concluded that the situation for women suffering religious and other forms of coercion had demonstrably worsened over the previous year.<sup>7</sup>

Evidence suggests that the Coronavirus pandemic has provided the perfect breeding ground for acts of sexual violence. According to the UN: “Since the outbreak of COVID-19, emerging data and reports

from those on the front lines have shown that all types of violence against girls, particularly domestic violence, has intensified.”<sup>8</sup> Research showed that vulnerable converts in lockdown with their families are at a greater risk of general abuse, especially in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.<sup>9</sup>

***“We are going to put into action new efforts to strike fear into Christians of the power of Islam by kidnapping women.”***

**BOKO HARAM**

The research for this report suggested that in the countries under review, among minority faith groups as a whole, Christian girls and young women are particularly susceptible to attack. According to the Christian Association of Nigeria, Christians make up 95 percent of women and girls being held by Islamists.<sup>10</sup> In Pakistan, the Movement for Solidarity and Peace calculated in 2014 that Christians could comprise up to 70 percent of minority faith girls and young women forcibly converted and married every year.<sup>11</sup>

Another key finding, frequently emerging in research on the topic, is that there is a higher incidence rate of sexual and religious persecution of women in situations of conflict. This was evident especially

during the Daesh (ISIS) military takeover of parts of Syria and Iraq where there was “an organised system of sexual enslavement of minorities”.<sup>12</sup> There are reports of it elsewhere, too, such as in Mozambique and in other countries where religious militancy has thrown whole communities into disarray. The violence has also caused an upsurge in trafficking.<sup>13</sup>

The Daesh example also points to perhaps the most significant long-term factor of concern regarding forced marriage and conversion of Christian girls and women, namely evidence that the perpetrators’ motive is to limit the growth, and sometimes the very survival, of that particular faith group. Forcing a woman to abandon her Christian faith not only wins a convert to the predator’s religion; it also ensures that any children born, including through forced marriage, are claimed for that new faith too. Referring to Daesh fighters, Christian persecution expert Marta Petrosillo stated: “Forced pregnancies and conversions are... a means to secure ‘the next generation of jihadists’”. This applies to many others engaged in sexual violence and religious persecution.<sup>14</sup>

Evidence has emerged showing that religious coercion and sexual violence have been carried out in an effort to trigger a mass movement of an unwanted faith community. This could be said to apply to northern Nigeria, where a spokesman for Boko Haram stated that the aim of the militant extremist group was to drive Christians into leaving en masse, before



**In countries where persecution is rife, impoverished Christian women and girls are easy prey for sexual predators with no respect for religious minorities.**

adding: “We are going to put into action new efforts to strike fear into Christians of the power of Islam by kidnapping women.”<sup>15</sup> According to Amnesty International’s Makmid Kamara, those seized by Boko Haram suffered “horrific abuses”<sup>16</sup> including rape.

Such evidence indicates that instances of systemic abduction, sexual violence, forced marriage and conversion of Christian women in countries such as Nigeria, Iraq and Syria, can be categorised as genocidal by nature. The fourth ‘Element’ of the ‘1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide’ is the presence of “measures intended to

prevent births within the group”.<sup>17</sup> There is thus a link between the girls and young women who are the focus of this study and the convention, which categorises genocide as “acts committed with intent to destroy in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”.<sup>18</sup>

Although in some countries the targeting of Christian girls can be defined as genocidal in nature, in many others it is impossible to draw the same conclusion, not necessarily because the problem is less severe but in large part because of a paucity of evidence. Indeed, in almost every instance, research carried out for this report demonstrates widespread

under-reporting. In Nigeria, for instance, the government documented 210 cases of conflict-related sexual violence in 2020, including rape and forced marriage, “noting that such crimes continue to be chronically under-reported”.<sup>19</sup> And, demonstrating the struggle to assess the scale of the problem in Pakistan, one piece of research suggests that nationwide up to 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls are forcibly married and converted every year,<sup>20</sup> while other evidence gives the same figure for just one province – Sindh.<sup>21</sup>

That there should be such widespread under-reporting of cases is largely self-evident. The main reason, and one that became increasingly apparent as research for this report continued, is fear of casting shame on the victim, their families and sometimes their community. In Nigeria, the UN highlighted under-reporting “owing to stigma and harmful social norms”.<sup>22</sup>

Speaking from Iraq, Syriac Catholic Archbishop Nizar Nathaniel Semaan highlighted difficulties finding out what happened to minority faith women and girls who had been abducted by Daesh, adding: “What did they do? Did they get married? They won’t say anything because they are ashamed and don’t want to talk about it.”<sup>23</sup> Low reporting levels are also associated with fear of reprisal from perpetrators. This factor is a recurring theme in a significant proportion of the cases examined in this study. When two 18-year-old Coptic girls went missing in Egypt in summer 2021, no details were released

about the incident, prompting speculation that families had agreed to say nothing as the price to be paid for their return.

A third key reason for under-reporting is institutional resistance from police and courts in following up cases of missing girls and women. This affects the incidence rate as perpetrators know their chances of punishment are reduced if they confine their attacks to minority faith communities. In Egypt, for example, a former gang member reportedly described how Salafist militants had funded kidnappers’ targeting of Coptic girls and young women, a process he said was aided and abetted by police officers. It was alleged that the police had conspired by reporting the female Christians as missing rather than abducted.

In Pakistan, the police and courts system are frequently accused of colluding with perpetrators. Reporting on a series of abductions, forced marriages and conversions of Christian girls as young as six, a report from the Gatestone Institute concluded that “everyone, including local police, court officials and Islamic clerics seem bent on facilitating this human rights tragedy.”<sup>24</sup> And the courts and judicial system are also blamed for being biased against Christians, frequently delivering justice skewed to protecting the interests of perpetrators and preventing them being successfully prosecuted. The essence of this problem is a clash of cultures and corresponding legal systems, with official state legislation, allegedly secular

**Institutional ambivalence and pressure from extremists mean that many women in Pakistan are helpless when their daughters are abducted and forced to marry their kidnappers.**



in outlook, frequently being trumped by other codes of practice, informed by religious precepts and weighted to favour the non-Christian party. Central to this are tribal, cultural and religious norms, including traditional Shari'a interpretations which protect child marriage.

In Nigeria, for example, the federal Child Rights Act bans marriage or betrothal for those under the age of 18 but critically it has not been enacted in 11 of the country's 36 states where local state law or other legislation takes precedence.<sup>25</sup> In Pakistan, the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, as amended by the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961, imposes a minimum age of 16 for would-be brides.<sup>26</sup>

Calls to raise the bar to 18 were met with opposition by Islamist political parties.<sup>27</sup> However, this belies the degree to which courts set aside state legislation in favour of Islamic law, often on the pretext that the bride has converted to Islam, whereby marriage is permissible after a girl's first period. Evidence of pressure from Islamist mobs, known to pack court rooms, is also reported to have swayed justices, especially in lower courts.

Against a backdrop of widespread corruption, governments' willingness to do justice for victims and take preventative steps to tackle sexual violence and religious persecution of faith minorities has repeatedly been called into question by observers. While the UK government recognised that "Coptic Christian women in

Egypt face difficulties additional to other women in the form of... disappearances, forced abductions and forced conversions"<sup>28</sup> the Egyptian government has by contrast been described as dismissive of the problem. Regime spokespersons have claimed that the majority of cases do not relate to human rights violations and are to be seen only as involving young women eloping with someone from another religion.<sup>29</sup>

***"We need to act for the sake of the girls, the women, persecuted for their faith and sexually targeted because of their gender. We need to champion their cause; we need to hear their cries."***

There are signs, however, in countries where Christian women and girls suffer endemic sexual violence and religious persecution, that governments are starting to take steps to address the problem. In March 2021, the government in Nigeria announced specialist courts and judicial divisions to deal with acts of sexual violence, in particular those committed by extremists.<sup>30</sup> The previous November, Prime Minister Imran Khan's government in Pakistan launched an investigation into forced marriage and conversion of girls

and young women, looking at reports of injustice on a “case by case”<sup>31</sup> basis.

However, it is doubtful whether such initiatives will meaningfully address a problem that, as this report has sought to show, is so institutionalised, affecting the courts and the police, and one that is so deeply rooted in society. The concern is that such measures are window-dressing for the West, designed to assuage the concerns of governments anxious about the moral implications of trade and aid involving countries with a dubious record on key human rights issues. It is likely that only a more fundamental and strategic approach to tackling systemic religious and gender discrimination will deliver the changes that are so sorely needed to enable Christian and other minority faith women and girls to be freed from the threat of sexual and religious persecution.

Some faith groups interpret FoRB in ways that “necessarily and inevitably clash” with the human rights of women. Oxford University’s Dr. Nazila Ghanea has written: “There is frequent invocation of religious norms as defence in order to oppose gender equality claims... [Grave] violations of the human rights of women and girls are carried out in the name of (religious) tradition. Often the state then endorses violations or neglects to act effectively on them.”<sup>32</sup> An understanding of underlying nuances is also necessary.

It would be a fundamental misreading of religiously motivated sexual coercion and violence to suggest that faith is the

single or even necessarily the prevailing factor involved. Rather, religion is often part of the mix of indicators denoting vulnerability, perceived as giving culprits a passport to impunity. As Professor Mariz Tadros has stated, ideologically motivated sexual abuse involves “predators targeting girls and women who are vulnerable often because of economic deprivation, personal hardship, harsh family circumstances and social rejection”.<sup>33</sup>

“It is very difficult being a Christian girl in our country. So often our girls are abducted and the depraved things they suffer are too awful to imagine. It is so frightening. Who is there to help us?” With these words, one of the victims interviewed for this report, who asked to remain anonymous, articulated the urgency of freeing Christian girls from the bondage of religious and sexual enslavement. She wanted justice. The very nature and extent of the suffering described in this report mean that in producing it ACN is not only concerned with raising awareness but also with creating an appetite for change – and change that happens without delay.

The research summarised here is aimed at influencers at all levels, be they people of faith committed to building up their community, be they Church leaders, be they politicians, be they government or others in public service. We need to act for the sake of the girls, the women, persecuted for their faith and sexually targeted because of their gender. We need to champion their cause; we need to hear their cries.



**A Coptic cross atop a church in Luxor at sunset.**

For decades Coptic Christian women have been kidnapped and subjected to physical and psychological abuse, including rape, imprisonment, violence and forced servitude – often under the cover of marriage. Perpetrators are rarely pursued by authorities.<sup>34</sup>

Although the international community recognises this phenomenon – indeed UK Home Office guidance makes it clear that “Coptic Christian women in Egypt... face difficulties additional to other women, in the form of sometimes being the target of disappearances, forced abduction and forced conversion”<sup>35</sup> – Egyptian authorities are highly dismissive of these cases. The usual narrative from government spokes-

persons is that the vast majority concern young women eloping with someone from another religion.<sup>36</sup>

Egypt’s reluctance to acknowledge these abductions comes despite two significant studies. The first of these, published more than a decade ago, provides first-hand evidence from women who were kidnapped, or otherwise lured into marriage, and abused. The research by Prof Michele Clark and Nadia Ghaly showed:

- i) Numerous cases involving forced kidnappings.
- ii) A repeated pattern of women enticed into relationships only to encounter exploitation.

The latter category often involves young women being lured into a coercive relationship under the guise of romance.<sup>37</sup> Cases like R.'s, who, feeling trapped in an unhappy marriage, left to live with Ahmed, who offered to marry her. But she was locked up and told that if she tried to escape she would be killed.<sup>38</sup> After eloping, girls often discover they have been tricked, but by then they are powerless. Captors have even taken videos of them being sexually abused to induce shame and deter girls from trying to return to their families.<sup>39</sup>

Such crimes violate UN conventions and protocol for human trafficking – indeed the forced disappearance of girls under 18 years of age also contravenes the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>40</sup>

One former member of a kidnapping gang that targeted Coptic girls spoke about how these abductions are meticulously orchestrated. He said: “They weave a spider’s web around [the girls].” Most of them are passed to Salafist groups who force them to convert. “And once they reach the legal age, a specially arranged Islamic representative comes in to make the conversion official”. The former gang member also stated that kidnappers are paid handsomely by these groups, and that police officers have conspired to report these young women as missing rather than abducted.<sup>41</sup>

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The problem is compounded by under-reporting in the media, partly because of the wall of silence that often descends when young women are returned. Two 18-year-old girls who went missing recently, Injy Rizk Farouq from Menoufia (June 2021) and Marina Reda Zachari from Giza (July 2021), were both eventually returned to their parents.<sup>42</sup> No details were released about their abductions, and it has been speculated that families agree to keep quiet as part of the price they pay for their return.

Many others are still missing, like Hanan Isaac Wanees Ghabrial, a married mother of two from Shubra Al-Khaymah – even though her family were able to name the suspects they believed were holding her.<sup>43</sup> For numerous Coptic Christian women the hell of being abducted and abused remains an ongoing reality.

# RANYA ABD AL-MASIH<sup>44</sup>

**39-year-old Ranya vanished from Mina village in Menoufia Governorate on 22nd April 2020. The following day, the family reported the disappearance of the English teacher and mother of three to the police.<sup>45</sup>**



A few days later a video was released on social media. In it Ranya, a devout Christian who was active in her local Coptic Orthodox church, appeared wearing a Muslim Al-Amira headscarf, saying she had converted to Islam nine years previously. She stated that she had left her home of her own free will, taking her jewellery with her. She recited the shahada (Islamic profession of faith) and asked her husband and family to stop searching for her.

The family were extremely suspicious as, contrary to what was said in the video, none of her jewellery was missing. Her brother, Remon, said: “She was definitely kidnapped and forced to make that video”. He added that he believed she had been “threatened and coerced”.<sup>46</sup>

Ranya’s family also claimed that police knew where she was being held.

No progress was made until the local diocese led by Coptic Orthodox Bishop Binjiman of Menoufia took up her case. In early May, the Menoufia Assembly of Priests released a statement asking authorities to take action. Three weeks later, with no sign of any significant movement in Ranya’s case, the Assembly stated that until steps were taken to secure her return they would be withdrawing from Beit Al-Aila – a government backed inter-faith initiative. Established in 2011, Beit Al-Aila aims to overcome sectarianism and promote national unity between those of different faiths. The Assembly of Priests denounced Beit Al-Aila for its “utter passivity” in Ranya’s case.<sup>47</sup>

The Church kept the pressure on; in June officers arrested 15 Copts participating in a peaceful sit-in in Mina village, which was organised to protest against police inaction. They were released the following day.<sup>48</sup>

On 15th July, Ranya was finally set free. Pictures of her back home with her family went viral on social media, as did her declaration that she had never converted to Islam. Although no details of her disappearance were made public, Al-Azhar, the Islamic authority which registers conversions to Islam, backed her up by saying she

had not converted, as in Islam there can be “no compulsion in religion”.

Bishop Binjiman later confirmed that Ranya had indeed been kidnapped, having been forced into a car by two women. He said that police had told the family not to talk publicly about the case, adding that he was aware of 15 similar cases of kidnappings.

The bishop said that, during the almost three months that she was held, Ranya had been sexually and psychologically abused by her captors.<sup>49</sup>



# MARIAN KAMEEL ABDO

**In March 2021, married 21-year-old university student Marian went missing from El-Marg, north-east Cairo Governorate. She was two months pregnant when she disappeared.**



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# MAGDA MANSUR IBRAHIM

**20-year-old Magda was seized as she was travelling from her home in Al-Badari to college in Assiut on Saturday 3rd October 2020. Despite the family reporting the case to police, authorities took no action.**



Three days later a video was posted on social media in which Magda appeared wearing a hijab, declaring she had converted to Islam six years previously. She stated that she was either engaged or married to a Muslim man – she was not clear on this point and appeared to give inconsistent information. At the end of the film, Madga asked to be left alone.

Her family rejected the claims in the video.<sup>51</sup> Her father said it was unreasonable to believe that a 14-year-old girl had clandestinely converted and had

been living as a Muslim for six years in a Christian family. They also pointed to the contradictions in what she said, such as Magda's remarks about being married.<sup>52</sup>

Just under a week later, Magda was returned. The family released no further information about her ordeal. One commentator speculated that the girl's return appeared to be conditional on the family not speaking to the media any more, pressing charges, or seeking to find out who had kidnapped her.<sup>53</sup>

# Iraq & Syria

**When Pope Francis travelled to Iraq in March 2021, a journalist on the papal flight gave him a Daesh (ISIS) slave pricelist for Christian and Yazidi women.**



The lowest price – US\$43 – was for women between the age of 40 and 50. The most expensive – US\$172 – was for girls aged between one and nine.<sup>54</sup>

Under Daesh's caliphate, the kidnapping, rape, forced marriage and conversion to Islam of Christian and Yazidi women became a commonplace occurrence.<sup>55</sup> Even with the military defeat of Daesh in Iraq in 2017<sup>56</sup> and their territorial defeat in Syria in 2019,<sup>57</sup> the effects of these atrocities are still felt today.

Many women are still missing and those who have returned are reluctant to speak out, making it difficult to quantify how many were subjected to this crime. In

Qaraqosh, a Christian town in northern Iraq on the Nineveh Plains, it is estimated that Daesh took between 45 and more than 100 Christian women when they seized the town in August 2014. By 2019, only seven of these women had returned to Qaraqosh.<sup>58</sup>

Syriac Catholic Archbishop Semaan of Adiabene, which includes Qaraqosh, told ACN that the returned women were scared of being judged by the community and two or three returned women left Iraq for France. He said: "It became a social scandal. No one who I spoke to told me what they experienced under Daesh."

In neighbouring Syria, there are fears

that in Idlib, a jihadist stronghold, Christian women are still suffering this abuse. Father Firas Lutfi, Custodian of the Province of Saint Paul for the Franciscans of Syria, Lebanon and Jordan, told ACN: “I think this is still occurring, I think so. Unfortunately, Idlib is still occupied by different jihadist groups and I imagine it is still happening.”

He added: “This definitely happened to one Christian woman, she was a teacher and was subjected to sexual violence and then they killed her. Several different men abused her sexually and then they killed her.”

Father Firas highlighted the scale of the problem to ACN, saying: “Forced conversions would’ve happened to maybe more than hundreds of women. The jihadists controlled a huge area for years, for years.”

For now, the focus is on rehabilitating these women and consoling the family members whose wives, sisters, nieces and mothers have not been returned. It will take time for the scars to heal. The Christian women can only hope that widespread fears Daesh – or another militant group – will return prove unfounded.<sup>59</sup>



A Daesh (ISIS) price list, showing the going rates for Yazidi and Christian women.

## RITA HABIB

**Rita went to Turkey to try to register herself and her widowed father for asylum as Daesh (ISIS) swept across Iraq in 2014.<sup>60</sup>**

**On August 6th, she returned to Qaraqosh with the approvals she needed.<sup>61</sup>**



She tried to reach her father, who is partially sighted, and fought her way through refugees going in the opposite direction. The same night she arrived in Qaraqosh, the Peshmerga fighters protecting the town withdrew. She awoke to the sight of Daesh's black flags in the streets.<sup>62</sup>

She was ordered, on the pain of death, to gather in the square. The Daesh fighters separated them into older people, young men, young women and children. Rita's group was taken to Mosul and told they were going to be part of a prisoner exchange.

"You are the spoils of war, you and the Yazidis alike," Daesh members told Rita. She thought that as a Christian she would be afforded protection as "people of the book" are supposedly treated better under Daesh's ideology.<sup>63</sup>

Rita was first bought by an Iraqi from Mosul and stayed with him for a year and a half.<sup>64</sup> Rita said: "In the hospital in Mosul, we women were subjected to the most degrading abuse. Three children from my people were with me, and I witnessed them being sold to emirs in Mosul. I was sold to [Emir] Abu Mus'ab al-Iraqi. In his home, there was also a Yazidi girl from Sinjar named Shata...she was only 14 years old. He raped the both of us over and over again."<sup>65</sup> Rita added: "We were raped and tortured."<sup>66</sup>

Rita and the young Yazidi girl, Shata, were also tortured psychologically by the emir. She said: "He made us watch videos with terrorists slaughtering non-Muslims. In one of them, they were beheading Shata's brother."<sup>67</sup>

Rita was moved to Raqqa before being sold to a Saudi Arabian named Abu Khalid al-Saudi. She explained: “Abu Khalid was married to a woman from Morocco. I was beaten and tortured by her every day. She would not give up until I was bleeding, from my head, for example. They made me read the Qur’an and threatened to kill me if I did not convert to Islam.”<sup>68</sup>

Forced to clean and tidy the house, Rita said: “The wife would just shout, abed [slave] or kafir to summon me.”<sup>69</sup>

Next Rita lived with a Syrian in Abu Kamal on the border between Syria and Iraq. She was there for a year and four months until she moved to a village outside of Deir ez-Zur. It was there that members of the Shlama Foundation, a group funded by the Assyrian and Chaldean diaspora, posed as jihadists and bought her freedom.

She said: “I am very happy that after three years I reunited with my father. It is a joyous moment because he is the only family I have left.”<sup>70</sup>



## RANA

**Rana, then 31, and her husband didn't escape in time when Daesh took Qaraqosh on 7th August 2014.<sup>71</sup> She was taken to Mosul. Rana said: "I wanted to escape but there was no way to run away or leave."<sup>72</sup>**



For more than two years, she was transferred between owners in Iraq and Syria. She was sold to her abusive "owners" for up to £19,000. She was forced to cook for fighters' children and clean their homes. Rana said: "All the streets were full of mines. The family said, 'If you go outside that door we will kill you.'"<sup>73</sup>

She pretended to convert to Islam but at night she prayed to Jesus, and asked for the intercession of Mary. She said:

"There was so many times where I could have committed suicide, but I decided I did not want to lose my soul. I still had one bit of hope."

Rana was eventually rescued and returned home. Father Duraid Barbar, a local priest said: "The women tell me, 'I'm sorry because I left Jesus.' I tell them, 'There's no problem, because Jesus loves you, he never left you'"

# *Why the victims won't talk*

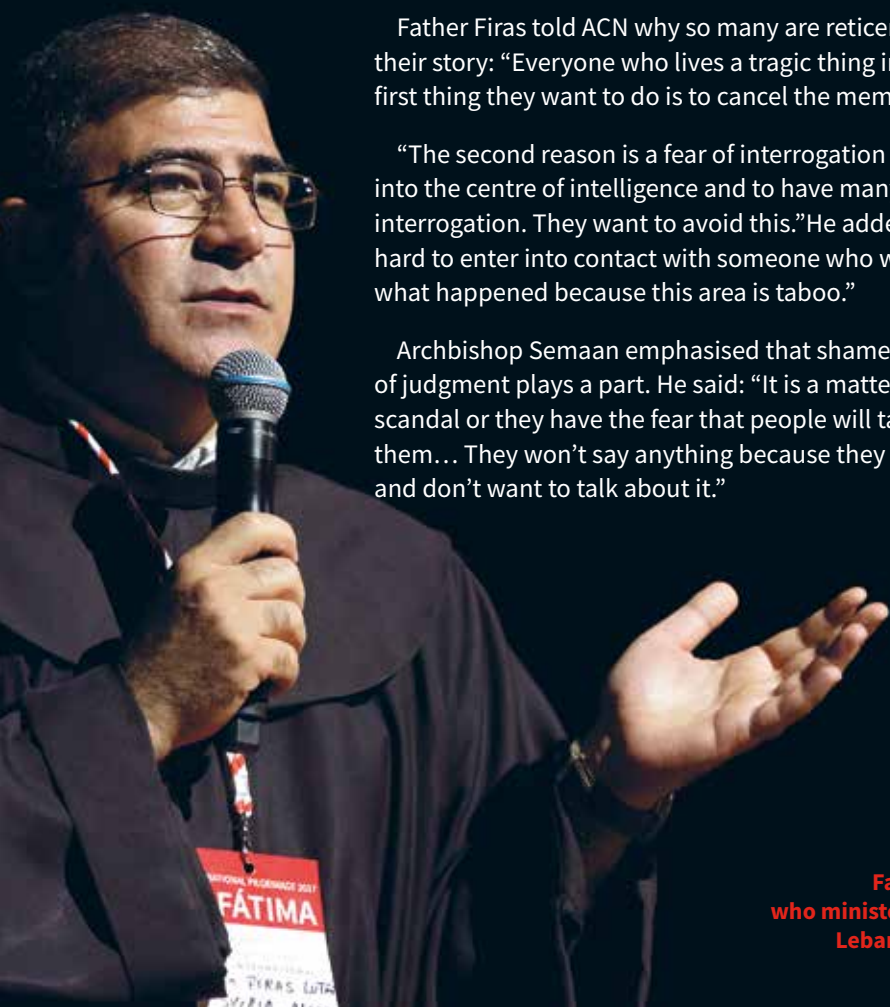
It is unknown precisely how many Christian women in Iraq and Syria were kidnapped and forced to convert and marry their abductor.

At the least, it is likely to be in the 100s. Many of them are still in captivity somewhere. Their families don't want to talk about the missing women, and nor do the few returned women wish to talk either.

Father Firas told ACN why so many are reticent to share their story: "Everyone who lives a tragic thing in the past, the first thing they want to do is to cancel the memory.

"The second reason is a fear of interrogation and to go into the centre of intelligence and to have many hours of interrogation. They want to avoid this." He added: "It is really hard to enter into contact with someone who will tell you what happened because this area is taboo."

Archbishop Semaan emphasised that shame and fear of judgment plays a part. He said: "It is a matter of social scandal or they have the fear that people will talk about them... They won't say anything because they are ashamed and don't want to talk about it."



**Father Firas Lutfi,  
who ministers across Syria,  
Lebanon and Jordan.**

# Mozambique



Displaced women in Cabo Delgado province.

The Islamist group Ansar Al-Sunna began a violent insurgency in the Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique in 2017.<sup>74</sup> They have links to Daesh (ISIS).<sup>75</sup> According to the UN, since October 2017 the conflict has killed more than 2,600 people and displaced upwards of 700,000. The extremists have frequently kidnapped young girls, including Christians, to be used as sex slaves and forced to marry the fighters.<sup>76</sup>

According to a report released by Rural Environment Observatory (OMR), a think tank based in Mozambique, abducted Christian girls are put under pressure to convert to Islam and told if they refuse they will be used as slaves.<sup>77</sup> The report states

insurgents have abducted more than 1,000 women and girls and forced many into sexual relations with their fighters.<sup>78</sup>

OMR researcher João Feijó explained to ACN what happens to abducted Christian women who don't convert to Islam. He said: "They have to do anything they are told to do". Interviewees in the report explained that they had to attend forced "education" sessions, which included ideological lectures and Qur'anic instructions.<sup>79</sup> The women are taught how to become "a good Islamic mother".<sup>80</sup>

A nun in Mozambique spent more than three weeks as a captive of jihadists and upon her release she raised the alarm

about the hundreds of children who were being abducted, many of them forced to become either child soldiers or child brides.<sup>81</sup> Father Kwiriwi Fonseca, a priest ministering to families displaced by Islamist violence, told ACN about the Sister's ordeal – and relayed her stark warning that young people are being coerced by militant extremists.

***“The terrorists use these children and forcibly train them to fight in their ranks, whereas the girls are raped and forced to become their ‘brides’. In some cases, when they have grown bored with them, these girls are simply thrown out..”***

FATHER KWIRIWI FONSECA

Father Fonseca said: “Sister Eliane herself was held for 24 days by the terrorists, in the mountains, and she begged me, ‘Padre Fonseca, please don’t forget the

people who have been abducted, above all the children and adolescents, who are being trained to become terrorists.’”<sup>82</sup> He added: “The terrorists use these children and forcibly train them to fight in their ranks, whereas the girls are raped and forced to become their ‘brides’. In some cases, when they have grown bored with them, these girls are simply thrown out.”<sup>83</sup>

The priest said: “We can speak of hundreds [of cases]”.

In June 2021, the charity Save the Children released a report stating that “at least 51 children, most of them girls” were seized by non-state armed groups and that the girls were at risk of sexual violence and being forced into early marriage.<sup>84</sup> The charity – which also reported that a child perhaps as young as 11 was beheaded during the conflict<sup>85</sup> – said this number was likely to be much higher due to under-reporting of the problem.

Between September 2020 and April 2021, the International Committee of the Red Cross said it had registered more than 2,600 appeals in Mozambique from people who had lost family members, most of whom are young adults and children.<sup>86</sup>

# MOZAMBIQUE CASE STUDY



Women in Mozambique are at risk of abduction.

‘Aana’\*

*\*Not her real name*

**For security reasons, the circumstances of Aana’s abduction have not been revealed. The only details given are those she has provided.<sup>87</sup> Yet, her testimony sheds precious light on what happens to Christian girls who fall into the hands of the jihadists.**

Aana said the Christian girls were given a “choice”: convert to Islam and marry a fighter, or become slaves.

She said: “For the girls and women they had three options: to be chosen by one of the soldiers to be a future wife; or to be chosen by some of the men, not for marriage, but to follow the more radical norms of Islam.

“[They prepare] the young woman to become true Islamic, to become a good

Islamic mother. Because they believed that the woman is the one who educates the family to follow Islam in the right way. The third option was for those who were Christians and who didn’t want to convert, who would be chosen by the soldiers to be slaves.”<sup>88</sup>

The jihadists abducted the girls in large groups and immediately started indoctrinating them. According to the OMR, “converted Christians” are either used in

military missions or marry an insurgent. Those who refuse to convert, as well as being forced into slavery, are also at risk of being trafficked.<sup>89</sup>

Aana explained that the indoctrination began as soon as she was taken hostage, stating: “The day we arrived they did a reading from the Qur’an, they brought up the whole issue of injustice in the country, of social abuse, of corruption...

“One of the things that they said the most was that democracy was demonic, because in Mozambique it allowed the politicians to steal and the people to continue to starve and die without any kind of care. And they indoctrinated those women

so that they would end up accepting their proposal.”<sup>90</sup>

After a while, the pressure eventually leads to the girls “changing sides”. She explained: “One lady said: ‘After a week you get used to it. You cry, you don’t eat for a while. But then you found out there is no way out.’ They begin to come to terms with reality and begin to change sides. And some very young wives of these people, they start to think that this is true.”<sup>91</sup>

Speaking of the treatment of one of the other girls, she said: “I believe it was a rape situation, because when she told us about it she cried a lot.”<sup>92</sup>

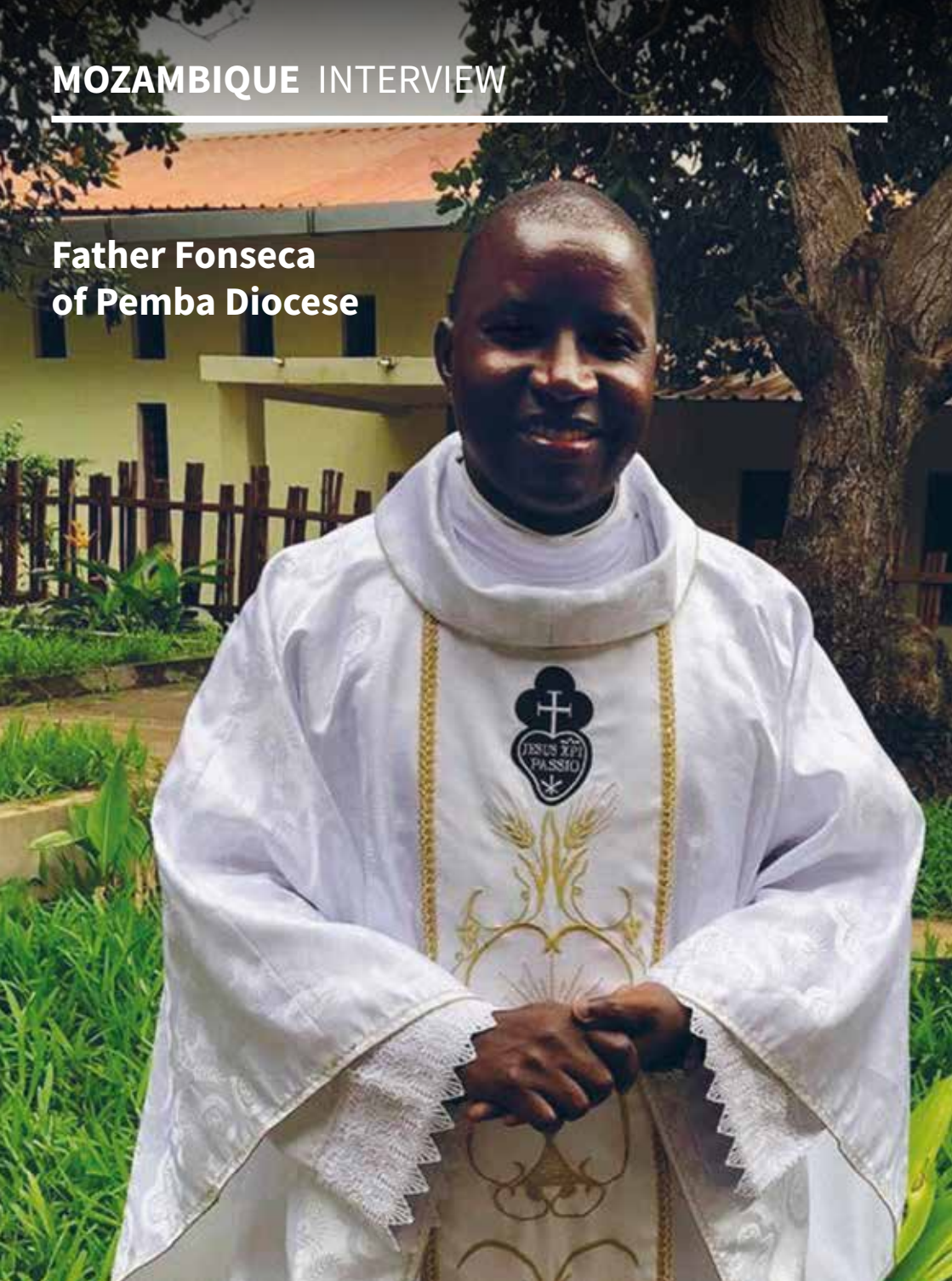
Aana is no longer in captivity.



# MOZAMBIQUE INTERVIEW

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## Father Fonseca of Pemba Diocese



# ON THE GROUND

**Father Kwiriwi Fonseca of Pemba Diocese has been ministering to kidnapping victims in Mozambique. He spoke with ACN about the growing crisis in his homeland. He told the charity that Christian girls face a real risk of abduction, rape and forced conversion and marriage because “they [the fighters] are able to do anything. They can do what they want.”**

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**Father, what can you tell us about the kidnapping of Christian women in Mozambique?**

Christian women are being kidnapped, not all alone but with other women. It is a phenomenon taking place where the terrorists are, where the fighting is taking place. We talk about the issue in general in places such as Mocimboa da Praia or in Palma, where the attacks are.

**You’ve previously talked about underage girls and boys being taken. Can you tell us more about that?**

When we went to the camps where the displaced people are, some women told us that their children are now in the hands of terrorists. The way they talked about it and the way they were crying convinced us it is happening. In the terrorists’ hands, there are some children – Save the Children has confirmed it. In the last week, the military went to destroy a camp of the terrorists and rescued some children.

**What fate befalls these young girls?**

When they are in the hands of the terrorists, they are involved in the military services so they become their soldiers. They are also taught the Islamic doctrine and they are taught the military terrorist activities. The women, some of them, are forced to marry with the terrorists.

**What is motivating this spate of kidnapping? What are the fighters hoping to achieve?**

The group is not clear with what they want. But, so far, from the way they do things we can understand it is an economic issue. Further, some of them are involved in drug trafficking and they are an international and national group involved in these problems. They are motivated by their Islamic beliefs even though we know they have other motivations on top of that as well. They use religion but, behind that, there are many other issues they care about.

# Nigeria



**Women who fled to St. James's Church, Yola, when Boko Haram attacked their village.**

Most of the women and girls who are abducted and abused are seized by extremist groups like Boko Haram, however there is a smaller but significant number of Christian girls taken in what are sometimes referred to as 'community kidnappings'.

The Boko Haram insurgency in northern Nigeria has involved innumerable atrocities including mass abductions, as it attempts to seize territory with the goal of founding an Islamist state. In 2020, there were 210 documented cases of conflict-related sexual violence, including rape and forced marriage, affecting 94 girls, 86 women and 30 boys. The UN noted such crimes are chroni-

cally under-reported because of social stigma.<sup>93</sup>

Both factions of Boko Haram<sup>94</sup> have abducted girls and young women, often forcing them to marry their members. The forced marriage of Christians is accompanied by coercion to convert to Islam, and compulsion to enter into sexual relations. While forced marriage is by no means restricted to Christian females, they have been extensively targeted<sup>95</sup> and, according to the Christian Association of Nigeria, Christians make up 95 percent of those being held by the Islamists.<sup>96</sup> Indeed Boko Haram began its abduction campaign by specifically seizing Christian women and children in 2013 in retaliation for

the long-term detention of Boko Haram family members by authorities.<sup>97</sup>

It has been suggested that such practices, which reflect the behaviour of rebel groups in other Sub-Saharan conflict zones, have two drivers. Firstly, women are seen as assets, productive as well as reproductive, providing services such as cooking and cleaning. Indeed, not all those seized are forced into marriage: UN nurse Alice Ngaddeh has been described as a “slave” by the extremists who took her.<sup>98</sup> Secondly, the sexual abuse of women can have a “punitive dimension”, as seen in the systematic rape of female students during the 2013 attack on university accommodation in Maiduguri.<sup>99</sup>

However, the forced abduction and marriage of girls by extremists should be contextualised within broader trends within Nigeria, including discrimination against indigenous Christian communities in at least 16 out of the 19 northern states<sup>100</sup> and Nigeria’s high rates of child marriage. Tribal, cultural and religious norms, including traditional Shari’a interpretations, protect child marriage – and although the federal Child Rights Act bans marriage or betrothal for those under 18 years, at the time of writing it has not been enacted in 11 of Nigeria’s 36 states where state or other law takes precedence.<sup>101</sup>

These factors may also give some indication as to why the kidnapping and forced marriage of minors occurs in the community – although it infracts the country’s criminal law. Even when girls are liberated, there have been delays in the judicial process. In 2015, 13-year-old Christian girl Ese Rita Oruru was abducted by Yunusa Dahiru, who forced her to convert to Islam and marry him. She was rescued the following year, by which time she was pregnant. Dahiru was arrested, but the case was not heard until 2020. He was convicted.<sup>102</sup>

*“In March 2021, Nigeria announced it would be setting up specialised courts and judicial divisions to deal with sexual violence, particularly that committed by extremists.”*

# REBECCA

**“They flogged me – 98 strokes every day. I took ill for two weeks. They took my youngest son Jonathan and threw him into Lake Chad alive, and he was drowned.”**



Today Rebecca is receiving trauma counselling – supported by ACN – to help heal her memories. Speaking in Hausa, via local priest Fr. Gideon Obasogie, she described her two years as a Boko Haram “wife”.

Rebecca and her family fled Baga, near Maiduguri, during an extremist attack in August 2014. She was pregnant and her husband was carrying little Jonathan and leading three-year-old Zachariah by the hand. As Boko Haram gained on them Rebecca begged her husband to leave them, saying they only kidnapped women and children, but killed men. Reluctantly he left. The fighters arrived soon after and randomly fired into the bush. Rebecca thought he was dead.

Trekking for 28 days, she was forced to wade through Lake Chad, up to her neck

in water, to go to the extremists’ camp. Rebecca miscarried on the journey. She was sold to a Boko Haram fighter and forced to marry him – but she refused to sleep with him. “I did not give in to him, most nights when he wanted to touch me I got the faeces of my children to rub on my body... this had always kept him away from me.”

As a punishment, she was beaten and flogged. They also made her dig a hole for three weeks, until she reached water. Then Rebecca fell ill. Her youngest son Jonathan, now three, was thrown into Lake Chad as a further punishment. They then interred her in a pit.

Fr. Gideon said: “When she came out of the pit after almost four days, she was very weak and the Boko Haram man forced himself upon her and made her

pregnant.” Despairing, she intended to kill herself with an overdose of paracetamol, but a pastor’s wife, who had already two children from an extremist, persuaded her to live. She later gave birth to a boy.

Rebecca managed to escape when the Islamists were carrying out raids. Getting permission to visit a cousin in a nearby village (also under Boko Haram control) from the wife of a senior fighter who had been left in charge, she made a break for it. She walked for over three weeks with her two sons.

Eventually they arrived in Diffa, Niger. Army troops ferried them to Maiduguri, where she found her husband was alive – but believing she was dead, he was preparing to remarry. He called off the wedding, but was distraught because of the new baby fathered by the Boko Haram fighter.

The family were initially looked after in a refugee camp run by Maiduguri Diocese along with 500 other IDPs. In 2021 the family are living outside the camp, but they are still receiving help from the diocese. Rebeca and her husband have renewed their marriage vows and, despite their challenges, they face the future with hope.





# RUTH NGLADAR POGU

**On 7th August 2021 Ruth was reunited with her family after more than seven years in captivity. It was the first time she had seen them since she was seized by Boko Haram in April 2014 as one of the 270 girls taken from the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State.<sup>104</sup>**

After their captivity the girls, who were mostly Christians, were given the stark choice of converting to Islam and marrying Boko Haram fighters, or becoming slaves. Ruth, like the majority of the girls, opted to convert and marry. Ruth was recovered when her Boko Haram husband surrendered to the Nigerian military on 28th July 2021 in Bama. She had two children by the man.

State Governor Babagana Umara Zulum, who met with Ruth and her family, said she would “undertake a rehabilitation and reintegration programme that will focus on her health, psychosocial wellbeing and her chosen path to a productive future, all of which will be determined by her”. He added that Ruth’s reunion with her parents kept alive the hopes of other families whose daughters had been kidnapped.<sup>105</sup> At time of writing, more than 100 of the Chibok girls are still in the hands of Boko Haram.

# SADIYA AMOS

**17-year-old Sadiya was abducted in Gidan Dio Nassarawa Tudun Wada Anchua, Kaduna State on the night of 5th January 2020.<sup>106</sup>**



Two days later, her father, Amos Chindo, was forced to attend a Shari'a court in Anchau, where a lawyer accused him of having prevented his daughter Sadiya from converting to Islam. Proceedings were adjourned to 14th January, when priests from the Anglican Diocese of Ikara went with Sadiya's parents to argue that, as Christians, the family were not subject to Shari'a law. However, the judge declined to hear them and, in Sadiya's absence, ruled the girl had converted and closed the case.<sup>107</sup>

The Hausa Christians Foundation mounted a campaign, calling for her release. In a statement the foundation said this is one of 30 similar cases they have highlighted over the past three years, adding that often a girl "will be sexually abused even before the marriage to make the parents give up on her when she becomes pregnant."<sup>108</sup>

Sadiya eventually escaped when her guards fell asleep after they left the door to her room open. She described how, after her kidnapping, she had been kept in a room for more than a month and forced to convert to Islam.<sup>109</sup>

# Pakistan



**Girls are at risk of abduction in parts of Pakistan.**

The abduction, forced marriage and conversion of Christian girls and women is endemic in Pakistan. While there is no consensus on the precise scale of the problem, research clearly reveals the high incidence rate. The Movement for Solidarity and Peace calculated in 2014 that every year up to 1,000 young Christian and Hindu women and girls aged between 12 and 25 are abducted and forced to convert to Islam. Of that number, almost 70 percent were reported to be Christian.<sup>110</sup>

Other research paints an even more dire picture. In April 2019, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), a national NGO, reported that in the

previous year 1,000 cases of forced conversion of Christian and Hindu women had taken place in Sindh Province alone.<sup>111</sup> As the director of the country's Catholic Centre for Justice and Peace Naem Gill pointed out, the exact number of forced conversions and forced marriages in Pakistan is "very difficult to gather" as "the majority of cases are not reported as most of the victims are poor and vulnerable."<sup>112</sup>

Indeed, studies show widespread under-reporting of cases. Drivers include a wish to avoid social shame and the threat of retaliation from abductors and accomplices. Many minority communities exist as a feudal under-class and they are

unwilling – or unable – to articulate their rights in the face of repression from the majority group.

Indications suggest abductions and forced conversions are getting worse. According to Pakistan's Centre for Social Justice, 162 questionable conversions were reported in the media after 2012, of which 49 took place in 2019 alone.<sup>113</sup> Nearly half of these were minors, some as young as 11. Increased reporting of incidents and growing international concern prompted Prime Minister Imran Khan's government in November 2020 to launch an investigation on "a case by case basis".<sup>114</sup> The stated objective was "to find reasons for the issue".

In search of an explanation, women's rights organisations and religious persecution NGOs have highlighted problems in the police and courts in both reporting cases and carrying out justice. The Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 sets the minimum age at 16 for women and 18 for men.<sup>115</sup> In 2019, the Senate passed an amendment to the act raising the minimum age for women so that it is in line with that of men.

But religious political parties such as Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) and Jamaat-e-Islami claimed the proposed legislation was anti-Islamic and requested it be discussed by the Islamic Ideology Council.<sup>116</sup> This points to a fundamental flaw in the justice system whereby

often judges and magistrates sanction marriage provided the girl has had her first period. In this, the justices reflect legal precedents based on the Hanafi school of Shari'a jurisprudence which predominates in Pakistan.

***"Every year up to 1,000 young Christian and Hindu women and girls aged between 12 and 25 are abducted and forced to convert..."***

Amid growing concern about a spate in abductions of minority faith girls, Church leaders were disappointed in July 2021 when reports emerged that the Supreme Court of Pakistan had refused a request to intervene. Supreme Court Justice Mushir Alam was said to have rejected an appeal by Church of Pakistan Bishop Azad Marshall for a constitutional petition to protect Christian girls from forced conversion and forced marriage.

In his response, Bishop Marshall, President of the National Council of Churches in Pakistan, said: "We had pinned our hopes on the Supreme Court for addressing this long-standing grievance of the Pakistani Christians," adding that he was "saddened" by the decision.<sup>117</sup>

# Farah Shaheen

**Aged just 12, Christian girl Farah Shaheen, from Faisalabad, was abducted, forcibly married and converted. During five months of sexual enslavement, she was shackled and forced to work long hours cleaning animal dung in her abductor's yard.**

Disaster struck on 25th June 2020 when Farah Shaheen was at home in Faisalabad with her grandfather, her three brothers and two sisters. That day, there was a knock on the door. When her grandfather opened it, three men burst in, grabbed Farah and forced her into a van. Farah's anxious family were told she was now married to a man named Khizar Amad Ali (Hayat) and had converted to Islam.

Farah herself later told the BBC: "I was chained most of the time... It was terrible. They put chains on my ankles and tied me with a rope. I tried to cut the rope and get the chains off but I couldn't manage it. I prayed every night, saying: 'God please help me'."<sup>118</sup>

Her father, Asif Masih, who was at work at the time of her abduction, told ACN



"Farah has told me she was treated as a slave... She was forced to work all day, cleaning filth in a cattle yard".<sup>119</sup>

"They repeatedly raped my daughter. She was in trauma after being subjected to physical and medical torture."<sup>120</sup>

Farah's father also told ACN what happened when he reported Farah's kidnapping to police: "I was called 'chuhra'

[an insult meaning ‘dirty’<sup>121</sup>]. The police refused to listen to me” and would not register the incident. “They pushed me around and physically abused me.”

Asif Masih said it was three months before the police opened the case by filing a First Information Report (FIR). Finally, at the beginning of December, Farah was discovered at Mr Ahmad’s house in Hafizabad, nearly 70 miles from her home.<sup>122</sup> Her ankles were wounded where she had been shackled.

Farah was placed in a women and girls’ refuge while a court case assessed the validity of her marriage. Central to the case, heard at Faisalabad District and Sessions’ Court, was whether Farah was underage at the time of her marriage. A birth certificate showed Farah was 12 when she was abducted in June 2020 but Mr Ahmad alleged she was over 16, the legal age for marriage. The court ordered a

medical investigation of Farah. Examining her teeth, bones and genitalia, the medics gave her age as 16 or 17. Farah’s father dismissed the medical findings as “an outright lie”.<sup>123</sup>

On 16th February 2021, however, the court ruled the marriage unlawful – the judge cited evidence that the marriage had not been registered properly – and allowed her to return home. Farah said she had told the court she had agreed to the marriage because her abductor told her if she said she’d been coerced, “he’d first kill me, then murder... my whole family”.<sup>124</sup>

Farah’s father described his “dismay” at the handling of the case, saying authorities were guilty of “repeatedly letting us down”.<sup>125</sup> The previous month (January 2021), the police dropped an investigation into three men including Mr Ahmad.<sup>126</sup> The family expressed frustration that no action was taken against Farah’s abductor.<sup>127</sup>



**Farah (right of centre)  
with her family after her ordeal.**

# NEELAM MASIH

**Christian woman Neelam Majid Masih, 30, reported being sexually assaulted by a man, who tried to force her to marry him and convert to Islam. She said he would have killed her had her neighbour not intervened.<sup>128</sup>**



Faisal Basra was reportedly armed on the evening of 14th February 2021 when he entered Neelam's home in Nanokay village, Punjab.<sup>129</sup> Neelam, a university student, told ACN: "Mr Basra entered my home at gunpoint, dragged me to my bedroom and began to punch and kick me. He threw me onto the bed and started to rape me. He demanded I marry him and convert. I refused. I am not willing to deny Jesus and he said that if I would not agree he would kill me. He hit me on the face with his pistol and I shouted and screamed and tried to escape but he kept pulling me

back, dragging me by the hair."<sup>130</sup> Nasir Masih, Neelam's neighbour and second cousin, intervened and Mr Basra ran away.

Neelam, who had injuries to her face, shoulder and legs, opened a First Information Report against Mr Basra, accusing him of rape. Her lawyer, Sumera Shafique, said: "Neelam is determined to tell her story to bring an end to attacks on Christian girls and young women."<sup>131</sup>

# MAIRA SHAHBAZ

**When Christian girl Maira Shahbaz escaped her abductor in August 2020 and renounced her forced conversion and marriage, her abductor accused her of apostasy,<sup>132</sup> a capital offence in religious law.**



Maira, from Madina Town, near Faisalabad, was 14 in April 2020 when she was kidnapped at gunpoint,<sup>133</sup> and went into hiding after fleeing the home of Mohamad Nakash Tariq. (For details see Foreword).<sup>134</sup>

Amid reports that suspicious armed men were going from house to house looking for Maira, on 4th February 2021 Aid to the Church in Need (UK) submitted an open letter to 10 Downing Street. The letter, calling on Boris Johnson to give asylum to Maira and her family, was signed by more than 30 bishops, parliamentarians and CEOs of charities supporting persecuted Christians.<sup>135</sup>

ACN also launched a petition for Maira's asylum, garnering more than 12,000 signatures. The petition was "drawn to...the urgent consideration" of Home Secretary Priti Patel by Fiona Bruce, the Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief.<sup>136</sup> Priti Patel told the House of Commons on 12th July 2021 that Maira's case "is very, very harrowing"<sup>137</sup> and the next day met Sir Edward Leigh MP, who had lobbied the Home Secretary on the subject, as well as Fiona Bruce and ACN's John Pontifex, to discuss next steps.<sup>138</sup>

1 Ewelina Ochab, "Disappearing Religious Minority Women and Girls in Pakistan", *Forbes*, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2020 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2020/09/27/the-disappearing-religious-minority-women-and-girls-in-pakistan/?sh=b43cd5920f2b>> [Accessed 27/08/21].

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# St. Maria Goretti

Saint Maria Goretti, Patron Saint of victims of sexual abuse, is a consoling heavenly advocate for all the millions of women and girls worldwide who suffer from sexual assault and abuse.

We ask St. Maria for her continued intercession before Christ on their behalf, hear their cries in heaven – and that God’s graces of healing and justice may abound where they are needed most.



**S**t. **Maria Goretti** was born in 1890 in Corinaldo, Italy. Maria grew up in a very devoted Catholic family. Her family worked on a farm while Maria took care of the house. In 1902, when Maria was 11 years old, a local 18-year-old man called Alessandro tried to rape her.

She resisted saying “*No! It is a sin! God does not want it!*” Alessandro choked her and stabbed her for resisting. Maria was taken to hospital where she died. Before she died, she said that she forgave Alessandro and said that she wanted to see him in Heaven.

Alessandro spent 27 years in prison for killing Maria. While in prison he had a dream in which Maria handed him lilies that

burned when he touched them. He woke up a changed man. When he was released from prison, he went to see Maria’s mother, who forgave him for killing her daughter.

Alessandro was present at St. Peter’s when Maria was canonised a saint in 1950. He later became a laybrother in the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin.



# PRAYER TO ST. MARIA GORETTI

**Priest:** Let us pray.

God our Father, in the name of your Son, Jesus, who redeemed us and in union with your Holy Spirit who sanctifies us, we come before you seeking the saintly intercession of your beloved daughter, Saint Maria Goretti.

Saint Maria Goretti modelled for us the virtues of chastity, purity, simplicity, fortitude, perseverance in prayer, and steadfastness in Faith. Her life demonstrated the power of mercy and forgiveness. We ask her to bring our needs to you and place them at the foot of your heavenly throne.

We pray in particular for victims of rape,

sexual abuse, and sexual harassment. We pray for an end to pornography and sins of sexual misconduct and cover-up, especially within the Church. We pray for those suffering with addictions of any kind.

We pray for the conversion, repentance, and reform of those who commit sins of sexual immorality and acts of violence and murder. We pray for those whose hearts are unable or unwilling to forgive and for those in need of mercy.

We ask these things in the name of Jesus in whom we place our trust and through Saint Maria Goretti, patron saint of victims of sexual abuse, who prays on our behalf.

**All:** *Amen.*

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## LITANY OF SAINT MARIA GORETTI

**Priest:** Saint Maria Goretti, a joy of your parents through your faith, hard work and dignity

**All:** *Pray for us.*

**Priest:** Saint Maria Goretti, exemplary model of holiness, fidelity to God's grace, of chastity and the pure of heart,

**All:** *Pray for us.*

**Priest:** Saint Maria Goretti, example of constancy and courage in time of trial and distress,

**All:** *Pray for us.*

**Priest:** Saint Maria Goretti, lover of truth and loyal to God and the Commandments,

**All:** *Pray for us.*

**Priest:** Saint Maria Goretti, heroic witness to the power of mercy and forgiveness,

**All:** *Pray for us.*

**Priest:** Saint Maria Goretti, Patron Saint of victims of rape and sexual abuse,

**All:** *Pray for us.*

**Priest:** In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

**All:** *Amen.*

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Aid to the  
Church in Need

ACN IRELAND

## About Aid to the Church in Need

**Aid to the Church in Need is a Pontifical Foundation of the Catholic Church, supporting the Catholic faithful and other Christians where they are persecuted, oppressed or in pastoral need.**



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