Assessing the specificity of the vulnerability of girls and women belonging to religious minorities

A methodological exploration

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Abstract

Are girls and women who belong to religious minorities more vulnerable than boys and men? The answer to this question may seem obvious, but determining an objective answer would require a complex and time-consuming research design. A more pertinent and easier approach would be to seek to understand the specific vulnerabilities of religious females. To this end, I propose a methodological framework that can be used to determine the vulnerability of females belonging to religious minority groups, and I apply it to cases in Colombia, Egypt, Mexico and Syria.

Keywords Gender-based violence, religious freedom, religious vulnerability, Colombia, Egypt, Mexico, Syria.

1. Introduction

Are girls and women who belong to religious minorities more vulnerable than boys and men? The answer to this question may seem obvious. After all, since women are generally believed to be subject to physical harm, discrimination and exploitation more frequently and more severely than men – for a variety of biological, socio-cultural and political reasons – it seems likely that the vulnerability of females is greater than that of males. For example, Coptic girls in Egypt are vulnerable not only to the discrimination that affects their religious community, but also to the relative impunity with which gender-based violence is committed against its female members. The World Watch Research Unit of Open Doors International has recently issued a series of compelling reports on Nigeria, Iraq, Ethiopia, Egypt, Colombia and the Central African Republic that describe the compound vulnerability of religious affiliation and gender.[2] Other sources have also raised the issue of the intersection-

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[2] These documents can be found at http://opendoorsanalytical.org/gender-specific-persecuti-

ality of gender discrimination and religious freedom (Tadroz 2015; Mounstephen 2019; see also the article by Symes in the present volume).

Highlighting the double or compound vulnerability of girls and women does not imply, however, that they are necessarily more vulnerable to suffering human-rights abuses than men. To objectively determine this, we would need to establish the degree of vulnerability of both genders and then compare them. This is certainly not an impossible exercise, but it would require a complex and time-consuming research design.

Moreover, one might ask what added analytical value would be gained from such an effort, if the objective is to raise awareness of a problem and work towards solving it. From a humanitarian perspective, it may be sufficient, though already difficult enough in some cases, to seek a comprehensive understanding of the threats to which women and girls are vulnerable, and to research what measures can be taken to reduce their vulnerability. Similarly, from an advocacy perspective, it may not be necessary to establish which gender suffers more. Rather, making a convincing case that women and girls suffer *significantly* (instead of more than males) may be sufficient to attract the desired political attention to the plight of this particular subgroup.

Therefore, a more pertinent approach would be to seek to understand the specific vulnerabilities of religious females – i.e. to what extent their suffering is relatable to their gender in combination with their religious affiliation, why this is so and, most importantly, what can be done to help them (and consequently what should be demanded from churches, humanitarian organizations and political authorities). Not only is this task more pertinent in my view, but I also believe it is easier to accomplish.

In this article, I first propose a methodological framework that can be used to determine the specific vulnerabilities of females belonging to Christian groups. Second, I present a sampling of empirical material on the vulnerability of women that I collected in recent years in Colombia, Egypt, Mexico and Syria.[3] Third, I apply my framework to assess the vulnerabilities of these females.

2. The specificity assessment

The aim of the specificity assessment is to determine to what extent vulnerability is specific to a particular minority, such as religious girls and women, as distinguished from other groups.[4] Following the proposition that it is possible to determine em-

on/ (password: freedom).

[3] I collected these empirical data while working for Open Doors International (2011-2018), as doctoral researcher at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (2012-2020) and as director of the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (2018-2020).

[4] As is common in sociology and psychology, I define 'minority' as a social subdivision of society that is less dominant than or even subordinate to the majority, without regard to its size.

pirically the degree of specificity – defined as a condition that can be more or less particular to an individual or group – of the vulnerability of a minority, I use a three-level sliding scale (Table 1), which I justify in the subsequent narrative. To attain a more nuanced picture than would otherwise be possible, I apply the sliding scale to determine the degree of specificity of the observed minority relative to particular threats it faces, and not to its vulnerability in general.

Degree of specificity	Interpretation
Low (not very specific)	The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, including the observed minority.
Medium (quite specific)	The whole population is vulnerable to this threat, but the observed minority is particularly vulnerable.
High (very specific)	The observed minority is specifically vulnerable to this threat.

Table 1: Degree of specificity of the vulnerability of the religious minority to identified threats Source: Petri (2020).

Using a sliding scale allows us to differentiate practically between threats that are applicable only to the observed minority and those it shares with other groups. In this way, I can overcome the implicit binary approach to specificity (specific versus not specific) that characterizes most analyses of religious-freedom violations. Binary approaches to specificity are misleading in my opinion, because they cause many types of threats to which minorities are vulnerable to be discarded based on the judgement that they are 'not specific' to this group.

This exclusivity trap is further reinforced by the use of preconceived notions of what qualifies as persecution. Such notions hinder an open-ended observation of all threats to which minorities are vulnerable. As Mounstephen (2019) notes, "A reluctance to recognize the particularity of vulnerability due to religious identity and belief has been highlighted by some witnesses" who were consulted for the *Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians*. (FCO is the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I was among the witnesses consulted for this report.)

Readers may observe similarities between my sliding scale and the categories of pressure used in *Compound Structural Vulnerabilities Facing Christian Women*,

a series of reports by the World Watch Research Unit (WWR) of Open Doors International, issued in 2018 and 2019. The similarities can be explained by the fact that I worked for WWR between 2011 and 2016 and have continued to advise the organization since then. My personal reflections on the matter were inspired by my interaction with the WWR team and have also contributed towards shaping its approach.

However, two elements differentiate my approach from WWR's. First, I focus exclusively on identifying the degree of specificity of the threats faced by women who belong to a religious minority, and I refrain from making any statement regarding their intensity in themselves or in comparison to the experience of men belonging to the same group. As argued above, establishing the specific vulnerabilities of women who belong to religious minorities is sufficient for advocacy and humanitarian purposes; there is no need to get into a controversy over whether women suffer more so then men. Second, I consider any kind of threats faced by religious women, regardless of whether there is clear direct targeting or religious persecution. To avoid the implicit connotations that the word 'persecution' carries, I deliberately avoid its use, favoring an open-ended observation of the specific vulnerabilities of religious minorities.

Bartman (2018), writing on the victimization of journalists in Mexico, confronted a similar problem that is also related to the determination of specificity. His article "undermines the official narrative that there is nothing distinct about violence against journalists, and that it is a mere corollary of crime" by proving that journalists have in fact been victims of targeted violence (and are even at a higher risk than the general population of being killed) by both organized crime and subnational government officials because of the nature of their work. My use of a sliding scale differs from but approximates Bartman's reliance on statistical probabilities. I have only three categories in the scale because the qualitative data I collected do not allow me to be more precise than that.

We must keep in mind that specificity is not the same thing as severity or intensity. To say that a threat has a low degree of specificity means only that it has a low degree of uniqueness for the observed minority, not that it is low in intensity. A threat with a low degree of specificity can be very intense, or the opposite can be true.

3. Examples of the vulnerability of women belonging to religious minorities

In this section, I present four cases of threats faced by religious women or girls in very different contexts. Since this is an exploratory study, I selected these cases based on the availability of empirical material. These cases serve primarily as illustrations of the position of women, highlighting both their vulnerability and their resilience. Due to space limitations, I cannot describe each context in depth. I discuss the specificity of these threats to women in the next section.

3.1 Reprisals for women's advocacy for freedom of education among the Nasa ethnic group in Colombia

In 2010, during a trip to Bogotá, Colombia, I met Ana Silvia Secué, an indigenous schoolteacher belonging to the Nasa ethnic group. In her interview with me, she described the violence she had suffered within her indigenous community after she decided to establish a confessional school and started an organization to advocate for the religious rights of Colombia's indigenous Christians:

> One time, guerrillas stormed into my classroom and took children to recruit them for their groups. Indigenous leaders had given them permission to do that. I never saw those children again. But I never give up and always continue and set up another school.

Christian women in the Nasa ethnic group reject traditional indigenous education and refuse to take part in traditional indigenous rituals (including traditional medicine), which they deem incompatible with their newly adopted Christian faith. This refusal has led to violent reprisals. In my interviews and in various press reports, Nasa Christian women complained regularly about the public school system in the *resguardos indígenas* (indigenous reserves), where children are required to learn about "indigenous rituals related to witchcraft," and the subsequent opposition they received from the indigenous authorities (Visión Agape 2012). One woman said:

> We [Christian women] teach them [their children] that God exists, but this bothered them [the indigenous leaders] because they are clinging onto their rituals, their customs. But the children welcomed it. We teach the children that the dignity of a person is that he is created in the image and likeness of God, not that he drinks *chicha* [a traditional alcoholic drink used in religious ceremonies], and that annoyed them.[5]

Ana Silvia actively engaged national media to denounce the treatment of indigenous Christian converts, lobbied the Colombian Congress to promote legal reforms, established connections with various national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and even ran for a senatorial seat herself in 2014. Her (unsuccessful) senatorial campaign, which revolved around her demands for freedom of education, caused her to be threatened with torture on several occasions by the indigenous authorities. In my interviews with her, Ana Silvia indicated that her training in civic rights has helped her develop and carry out her educational and

[5] Interview with María Teresa Mesa, 2013.

political initiatives. Thanks to a basic understanding of the law, she said, she has been able to fight legal battles and advocate for the rights of Nasa Christians before the national government.

In practice, however, the rights of Christian indigenous women (and, generally speaking, of religious minorities) are undermined by the broad legal protection granted to indigenous self-determination rights (Scolnicov 2011; Pinto 2015; Petri 2020). Here, it is necessary to confront the frequently heard charge that the language of justice and human rights is a form of Western and colonial imposition that is incompatible with the norms of traditional cultures. As Martha Nussbaum stresses in *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (2000), the rejection of religious freedom, or of any other human right for that matter, by appealing to traditional cultural norms is nonsensical. Regarding discrimination against women, Nussbaum (2000:225) argues that using the notion of tradition to resist this human right is not only self-serving but also too simplistic, because it ignores the fact that cultures are dynamic and are "scenes of debate and contestation," which include dominant voices but also voices of women (and, by extension, any vulnerable group) "which have not always been heard." In other words, if one wishes to appeal to tradition, one must also be willing to listen to the non-dominant voices that are part of this tradition. In a similar vein, Toft (2016) argues that because "the human rights regime has undergone a systematic diffusion across the world," depicting it as a Western imposition is both incorrect and a "denial of agency" of vulnerable communities.

3.2 Discrimination against Coptic girls in Egypt[6]

Violence against women is a major issue in Egypt, as reported by many human-rights organizations (Human Rights Watch 2013; Amnesty International 2015). It is even more severe for Coptic girls and is often related to kidnappings and forced conversion (Fox 2008:237). Researcher Magdy Khalil stated:

> Abducting and converting Coptic girls to Islam is not only a result of the paranoid and racist incitation against the Copts, it is an organized and pre-planned process by associations and organizations inside Egypt with domestic and Arab funding, as the main role in seducing and luring Coptic girls is carried through cunning, deceit, and enticement, or through force if required. (AINA News, 2009)

The abduction of Coptic girls increased after the January 2011 revolution as Islamist groups became increasingly visible (Marshall, Gilbert and Shea 2013). According-

[6] Some of the interviews quoted in this section were conducted by my colleague Markus Tozman and used with his permission.

ing to accounts, an increasing number of Coptic girls were abducted and forced into Islamic marriages after the initial January 25 revolution: "Salafis know who is part of their group and [who is] not. They will do whatever they want with the others. They would select women to abduct and forcefully convert to Islam or rape on the spot and nobody would interfere."[7]

Coptic women constantly feel the threat of gender-based violence, including the obligation to wear the Islamic veil.[8] As one interviewee put it, "the double vulnerability of Christian women lies partly in the fact that they are being considered infidels and an enticement to men because they go unveiled."[9] This double vulnerability is greater for the lower social classes, as Tozman (2013:3) noted, because they have more limited resources to defend themselves in the face of discrimination, economic hardships and sectarian violence. A Coptic historian declared:

> [An Egyptian citizen with full citizenship rights] has to be Sunni not Shia, has to have a certain income bracket, fully supportive of the state. … The discourse of discrimination is always based on class, race and then sexuality. Classes are dominant here, and then you can further dissect this. So if you talk about Egypt, probably the worst case of citizen to be is a disabled, homosexual, lower class, with a different ethnicity. But at the macro level, the largest aspect of discrimination would be based on class.[10]

Discrimination against Copts in the job market occurs primarily when with regard to public-sector jobs but also in the business sphere: "Even in the private sectors, there are companies that do not employ Christians at all. Those companies most probably are owned by leading figures of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist figures" (Thabet 2014:6). The same is true for appointments in media organizations. This situation affects all Copts, but women in particular: "Especially, women in the workplace experience discrimination and hostilities. A competent Christian woman engineer was denied promotion because Muslim male colleagues would not want to work under a Christian woman. A single Christian nurse had to stop working because Muslims did not want her to help them. Her employers did not support her."[11]

[7] Interview with Magda Ramzy, 2013.
[8] Interviews with Magdy Aziz Tobia, Marian, Casper Wuite and Moudi Fayek, 2013.
[9] Interview with Miriam van Norden, 2014.
[10] Interview with Karim Maged Malak, 2013.
[11] Interview with Miriam van Norden, 2014.

The complicity of the police and the impunity with which people committed violence against Copts were illustrated by the testimony of a Coptic woman who was beaten by the military and never received justice:

> For weeks, you could see the bruises on my body. When I went to the doctor for a physical examination, I was humiliated and harassed. I had no case to file against the soldiers, the police told me. I had to prove they had done this to me. Even after I had filed a report with proof of my bruises and eyewitness testimonies, I was pressed to give up my case. In the end, after a prolonged period of pressure and bullying, I gave up, realizing that I would not receive justice. As a Christian woman, I simply did not have the power and was not taken seriously and even threatened.[12]

3.3 Abduction of Christian girls by drug cartel violence in Mexico

Many areas of Mexico have recently experienced a particularly fierce upsurge of cartel-related violence (Schedler 2015; Rosen and Zepeda 2016). This violence affects the population in general, including Christian women. A particularly cruel account was shared by an evangelical pastor in a crime-torn city in the northwestern state of Tamaulipas:

> A pastor friend of mine was abducted by a criminal gang that was part of a satanic cult. His family was ordered to pay a ransom. His wife and family succeeded in collecting the money and the criminals came to take it. The pastor's wife asked them, "But where is my husband?" "He is at the beginning of your street," they told her. When she went there, her husband was there. Only he was not alive. She found him in a plastic garbage bag, killed and hacked into pieces.[13]

Even though strong religious faith may increase resilience by fostering increased self-awareness, it does not necessarily guarantee protection. Nevertheless, in my interview it became clear that Christian women with strong religious convictions had grown in courage and were often more able to defend themselves against threats. I interviewed one girl who had been kidnapped by Los Zetas, a particularly cruel drug cartel that adheres to a satanic cult called Santa Muerte (Holy Death). She explained:

> I was abducted along with other people by Los Zetas because I happened to witness one of their raids. I had every reason to fear for my life and that of my 10-year-old niece who was abducted as well. But I stood up and took authority. I told them, "I

[12] Interview with Sara, 2014.

[13] Identities of the interviewees have been kept confidential for their protection. Demographic details and transcripts of each interview are available from the author on request.

> am a Christian, you are not going to rape me. You are not allowed. You are going to release me and my niece, and you are going to give us food. I also want you to take off all your Santa Muerte amulets." Amazingly enough, they all did what I said. I prayed with these men and all the people abducted. Nothing happened to us, and after three days, my niece and I were released!

I received similar testimonies from other interviewees. One source shared that a friend abducted by Los Zetas was released when they learned he was a Christian. A girl who had also been kidnapped by Los Zetas stated, "They were going to shoot me, but something happened with the gun they were using because the bullet did not come out. One of Los Zetas told his partners to release me, saying that no one could touch this girl because God was with her." It appears that Los Zetas have some degree of respect for religion, possibly because many of them are extremely superstitious, as illustrated by their attachment to the Santa Muerte cult. Some interviewees also indicated that some gang members were raised in Christian families and continue to hold the religion in esteem, despite their criminal involvement. In most cases, however, this does not happen, and it appears that most criminals have no respect whatsoever for religion and religious institutions.

3.4 Sexual abuse of Christian women in Syria[14]

"Young unmarried women are directly threatened by kidnappings and rape," a Syrian refugee told Swedish journalist Nuri Kino (2013:7). Within a context of impunity and absence of rule of law, women are increasingly vulnerable to sexual abuse. In the conflict, Christian women are doubly vulnerable: "Women in general – particularly Christians – have become easy targets for male criminals" (Kino 2013:18). Open Doors field reports described the tragic case of one Christian girl from the Tabaleh area of Damascus who was kidnapped in 2012 and later found in a house with other women in a 'freedom fighter' area where she was used as a sex prize after their fighting. After she was returned home, she committed suicide.

The sexual assaults on women may or may not have a religious (Islamist) motive, but it can be assumed that they are enabled by the widespread impunity for such crimes. Some Muslim clerics have even offered theological justifications of rape, issuing several fatwas that authorized the rape of non-Sunni women and even speaking of a 'sexual jihad' (A Big Message 2013). In 2013, a Jordanian Salafi sheikh issued a fatwa on YouTube "declaring that it is lawful for opponents of the regime of Bashar al-Assad to rape 'any Syrian woman not Sunni [including Alawites, Druze and Christians]'" (Independent Catholic News 2013; Ibrahim 2013).

[14] This section contains edited excerpts from Pastoor (pseudonym) (2013).

4. Application of the specificity assessment

I will now assign a degree of specificity to each of the four threats to girls and women discussed in the previous section (Table 2).

Case	Degree of specificity
Reprisals for women's advocacy for freedom of education amongst the Nasa ethnic group in Colombia	Low
Discrimination against Coptic girls in Egypt	Medium
Abduction of Christian girls by drug cartel violence in Mexico	Low
Sexual abuse of Christian women in Syria	Medium

Table 2: Specificity assessment of threats against identified religious female subgroups

None of the threats was assigned a high degree of specificity, because none of these threats apply exclusively to Christian women. In other words, other groups, including men belonging to the same religious group or women belonging to other religious (or non-religious) groups, may face the same threats.

Nevertheless, these threats present some unique features directly related to the gender and religious affiliation of the women they affect. For example, discrimination against Coptic girls in Egypt was rated at a medium degree of specificity, because violence against women is an issue throughout Egyptian society but Coptic girls (and possibly girls belonging to other religious minorities) are specifically vulnerable to this threat, especially since crimes against them are committed with widespread impunity.

I applied a similar reasoning to the sexual abuse of Christian women in Syria. The threat of sexual abuse applies to women in Syrian society generally, but it especially affects girls from non-Sunni religions, including Christianity. Whether Christian girls are more affected by this threat than girls belonging to other non-Sunni religions cannot be determined from the available information.

The threat against advocates for freedom of education in Colombia was rated at a low degree of specificity. This behavior in which the indigenous Christian women are engaging is a direct extension of their religious convictions, since they view both indigenous rituals and indigenous education as things to avoid. The threats they face as a result of this stance could also apply to other non-Christian indigenous groups or individuals should they defy the political authority of the *resguardos indígenas*.

Finally, the threat of abduction of Christian girls by Mexican drug cartels, although very intense, was given a low degree of specificity, because it affects the whole Mexican population to a similar extent. Indeed, amidst the current upsurge of cartel-related violence, kidnap-for-ransom activities affect broad segments of society. However, the Christian convictions of the abducted girls are an important part of their testimony.

5. Concluding remarks

Implicit in many studies of religious freedom is the notion that a particular incident should only be considered as religious persecution if it applies exclusively to a religious group (or subgroup, such as religious women in the examples I presented), a notion Marshall (2018) rejects. This preoccupation with exclusivity is both unnecessary and dangerous. It is unnecessary because from a humanitarian or advocacy perspective, it is most important to plausibly establish that girls and women are affected by a particular threat, which should be enough to qualify the concern as structural and deserving urgent attention.

The preoccupation with exclusivity is also dangerous because it causes violations of religious freedom that have lower degrees of specificity to be overlooked. Indeed, it can have disastrous consequences if governments and relief agencies focus only on threats with a high degree of specificity, because this leads to the neglect of severe threats such as the Colombian and Mexican cases I discussed above. In my advocacy work for religious freedom, I have heard government officials use the argument that a particular human-rights violation cannot be qualified as 'religious' or as 'persecution,' which then becomes a justification for not acting on it.

The very fact that the Middle Eastern cases may be more familiar to the reader than the Latin American cases is likely related to the fact that the latter group is generally not considered as constituting violations of religious freedom. To be fair, observing gender discrimination committed for religious reasons in Latin America is particularly complex, because it is a majority-Christian continent with a predominant culture characterized by machismo. But this complexity only underscores the importance of taking the specificity of the threats affecting women into account.

To overcome this conceptual issue, the methodological innovation of the specificity assessment proposed in this paper consists in adopting a sliding scale instead of the implicit binary approach that many seem to follow. This sliding scale enables us to consider degrees of specificity rather than falling into the exclusivity trap and discarding threats that are deemed, for arbitrary reasons, 'not specific enough' or not religious persecution.

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