



Jubilee Campaign Submission to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Forced and Child Marriage as an Obstacle to the Effective Enjoyment of Human Rights by Women and Girls in Egypt, Nigeria, and Pakistan

I. Introduction

Over the past few years, Jubilee Campaign has submitted numerous reports to the United Nations various mechanisms regarding the plight of faith minority women and girls in the countries of Egypt, Nigeria, and Pakistan, where their intersecting vulnerabilities as both gender minorities and faith minorities exacerbates their susceptibility to kidnapping, forced marriage, and even forced religious conversion. At the same time, in these countries, there exist numerous obstacles for survivors of such violations to seek recourse and achieve justice.

II. Causes and Exacerbating Factors

A. Egypt

In Egypt where an overwhelming 90% of the population identify as Sunni Muslim, the robust Coptic Christian community – and other minority groups – is marginalized and oppressed by both state and non-state actors.

As is the case in many nations, women and girls are the most vulnerable subgroup of faith minority communities. Coptic Solidarity reveals in its groundbreaking 2020 report '*Jihad of the Womb*', that Coptic Christian girls and women are easily identifiable targets for kidnapping due to their distinct appearance. While the majority of Egyptian civilian women wear hijabs as part of the Sunni Islamic tradition, Coptic girls do not wear religious headscarves and often instead wear necklaces adorned with a cross pendant. Radical Muslim men often identify Coptic Christian girls and women who are physically vulnerable and travelling alone, at which point – rather than outright and violently abducting these individuals in broad daylight – they fraudulently lure these girls into romantic relationships with the false promise of a loving marriage and economic advancement, when in reality their intentions and eventual actions are to force the victims to renounce their Coptic faith, convert to Islam, and marry their captors against their will. In some horrific cases, the abductors will blackmail their victims by filming their sexual assault and threatening to share it to the victims' relatives and social circle; when

such incidents do happen, “shame culture” and “modesty culture” dictates that perpetrators get off relatively scot-free and the victims are blamed for their assault by being sexually promiscuous.¹

Coptic Solidarity notes that “there is ample evidence pointing to organized networks, related to Salafist groups, which are actively engaging in the phenomenon that we call ‘jihad of the womb’”. These trafficking networks will premeditate their crimes, choose women and girls ahead of time based on their vulnerabilities and the probability of success in their kidnappings, monitor the victims weeks prior to the abduction, rent out apartments to conceal their victims, arrange for Islamic officials to certify religious conversions and marriages, and effectively “weave a spider’s web around [the girls]”. Author and researcher Raymond Ibrahim also reports that the reason women and young girls are targeted specifically in these attacks is that (1) their initial abduction and conversion to Islam, and (2) subsequent impregnation with children of Muslim fathers achieves jihad in two ways, whereas kidnapping and converting a boy or man, for example, does not.²

B. Nigeria

Nigeria, unlike the other two nations discussed in this submission, is not an overwhelmingly Muslim nation. The Future of World Religions projects that 51% of Nigerians are Muslim, 47% are Christian;³ geographically, the northern half of Nigeria is home to the majority of the nation’s Muslims and is the primary location for persecution against Christian minorities.⁴

Islamist militant groups, most notably Boko Haram, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), and Fulani militants, have in the past decade engaged in mass kidnappings of schoolchildren – often girls – from their educational institutions and holding them either temporarily for ransom payments or permanently as sexual and domestic slaves. The incident that sparked this inhumane trend was Boko Haram’s 2014 abduction of 276 predominantly Christian girls from Government Secondary School for Girls in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria. Abubakar Shekau, who led Boko Haram from 2002 until his death in 2021, has solidified the group’s stance that any individual who does not subscribe to Boko Haram’s specific and strict interpretation of Islam is permissible as a target of conflict and abduction; by that logic, Boko Haram has historically targeted Christian girls, whom they regard as “infidels” and “apostates”, in their abductions.⁵ The Hausa-language name of the group, Boko Haram, translates in English to “Westernization is Sacrilege” or “Western education is sin”, and clearly establishes that the group harbors hostility towards individuals who partake in activities deemed western⁶; this explains their kidnapping of Christians, students, and those who fall into both categories.

Numerous women and girls that have been released from Boko Haram captivity over the years have shed light on the reality of forced marriage and sexual exploitation; many were violently threatened or forced to marry their captors, study Islam, act as domestic servants in militant camps, and give birth to Muslim children who would be trained in militancy. In March 2021, Naomi Adamu, who was 24 years old at the time of the 2014 Chibok kidnapping and who was referred to as ‘Our Mother’ by her younger classmates, repeatedly and fervently refused to marry her captors, renounce Christianity, and convert to Islam.⁷ One girl, Leah Sharibu, who was 14 at the time of her kidnapping by Boko Haram in 2018 in

¹ Coptic Solidarity, [‘Jihad of the Womb’: Trafficking of Coptic Women & Girls in Egypt](#), 10 September 2020.

² *Ibid.*

³ Pew-Templeton Global Religious Futures Project, [Nigeria](#).

⁴ Father George Adimike, [“Deborah Yakubu: The evil of killing in God’s name”](#), *Vanguard*, 21 May 2022.

⁵ Jubilee Campaign, [Kidnapping & Slavery in Nigeria](#), October 2021.

⁶ Britannica, [Boko Haram: Nigerian Islamic group](#); BBC News, [“Who, What, What: Exactly what does the phrase Boko Haram mean?”](#), 13 May 2014.

⁷ Chris Stein & Dionne Searcey, [“21 Chibok Schoolgirls, Reuniting With Parents, Tell of Boko Haram Slavery”](#), *The New York Times*, 7 October 2016.

Dapchi, has remained in militant captivity and, after years of refusing to renounce Christianity, has since been forced to convert to Islam, marry one of her captors, and has given birth to two children of rape.⁸

While Boko Haram activity has been on the decline over the past few years, we have seen more and more insurgents identified as likely Fulani militants conducting mass kidnappings similar to that which Boko Haram carried out at its height in between 2014 and 2018. While it is generally believed that these perpetrators operate on material goals, as the majority of victims are released following the reception of ransom payments, it is noteworthy that they have similarly targeted Christian educational institutions – Prince Academy School, The King’s School, Bethel Baptist High School – and individuals, such as two Christian girls Hassan and Husseina who are the teenage daughters of Evangelical Church Winning All elder Ibrahim Garba.⁹

C. Pakistan

Whereas Egyptian nationalism¹⁰ typically emphasizes common culture, language, peaceful unity, and post-occupation renaissance, and Nigerian nationalism centers around territorial and geographical claims and post-colonial development¹¹, Pakistani nationalism is not secular but is rather overtly religious, dating back to the Muslim League’s separation from India and formation of a distinct Muslim state.¹² As such, Pakistani religious nationalism has effectively made the persecution of non-Muslim citizens systemic.

Despite some recent improvements in the legal protection of girls from underaged marriage, including the 2019 Senate ratification of the Child Marriage Restraint Amendment Bill which raised the legal minimum marriageable age to 18 years – but which was subsequently rejected by the National Assembly¹³, an estimated hundreds to thousands of Pakistani Christian, Hindu, and Dalit girls are abducted by Muslim men, converted to Islam against their will, and entered into forced child marriage each year.¹⁴

While many cases are never reported in the media, from October 2019 to January 2022 Pakistani human rights organizations documented 28 girls between the ages of 12 and 19 years had been kidnapped, converted to Islam, and forcibly married. Some were abducted while traveling to and from school, work, and even church; all were kidnapped by much older Muslim men, such as neighbors, and even in one case the perpetrator was a police officer; some were subjected to imprisonment, sexual abuse, forced impregnation, and physical assault by their perpetrators. In many cases, families of the victims submitted documentation (i.e., birth certificates, school registration records) to courts and authorities to prove the girls’ status as a minor but were rejected, whereas perpetrators’ falsified records of their victims’ religious conversion, age, and marriage were accepted. In a few cases, authorities refused to investigate the abductions themselves, and perpetrators threatened and blackmailed parents into refraining from reporting kidnappings. Regrettably, girls who were eventually recovered and returned to their families often went into hiding in order to protect themselves and their relatives from retaliation.¹⁵

III. Consequences

⁸ The Guardian, [“Leah Sharibu gives birth to second baby in Boko Haram captivity”](#), 23 March 2021.

⁹ *Supra* Note 11.

¹⁰ [Egyptian Nationalism](#).

¹¹ [Nigerian Nationalism](#).

¹² [Pakistani Nationalism](#).

¹³ Jubilee Campaign, [Obstacles to Women’s Economic Empowerment in Nigeria, Pakistan, and Sudan](#), March 2022.

¹⁴ Jubilee Campaign, [Abduction, Conversion, & Child Marriage of Religious Minority Girls in Pakistan: 2022 Update](#), 2022.

¹⁵ *Supra* Note 14.

A. Educational Interruption & Economic Hardship

Forced marriage and child marriage have a direct impact on the girl or woman victim's realization of both educational and economic empowerment. World Bank research conducted in 2017 recorded that "girls who marry as children are less likely to complete secondary education: every year of marriage before the age of 18 reduces the likelihood of girls' secondary school completion by four to six percentage points". The report further reveals that child marriage directly impacts a girl's future potential earnings and productivity; "this is because child marriage curtails education attainment which in turn reduces women's expected earnings in adulthood. It can also curb their influence within the household and limit their bargaining power".¹⁶

Girls who marry before the age of 18 are likely to have more children in their lifetime than older mothers, and thus, are more likely to face welfare and financial hardships as they have more children to feed, clothe, and educate; this is only exacerbated in situations in which husbands prohibit their wives from leaving the home, returning to school to finish their pre-marriage education, and kickstarting careers to help earn a family-sustaining income. Moreover, because husbands of young girls exert total control over their wives' education and employment, they often restrain their wives to the home where they are forced to engage in housework and sexual and domestic servitude.

B. Effects on Physical Health

Human Rights Watch further explains the multitude of effects child marriage has on a woman's physical and social health. Girls who are married off at young ages often report higher rates of miscarriages and stillbirths as the young mothers' birth canals are not yet fully developed at the time of pregnancy and labor.¹⁷

As has been reported in Egypt, Nigeria, and Pakistan, girls and women who are abducted and forcibly married against their will often face violence at the hands of their captors-turned-husbands. Specifically, Nigerian child brides face terrible physical and sexual abuse in militant captivity, including spousal and gang rape, and should they resist, repeated physical beatings and deprivation of food and water. Studies have shown that in militant camps, the rates of HIV/AIDS, Gonorrhea, Hepatitis, and other sexually transmitted infections among female captives are relatively high. Moreover, while Pakistani and Egyptian forced wives are forced to participate in domestic labor such as cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, and homemaking, Nigerian victims are often required to additionally perform camp upkeep and repair, weapons maintenance, and treating injuries, all while they are deprived of sleep and food; therefore, not only is their physical health in jeopardy, but their psychological health as well, with comparatively high rates of trauma-borne psychosomatic illnesses as well.¹⁸

IV. Existing Obstacles to Prevention, Protection, Justice, & Accountability

	Obstacles to Prevention and Protection	Obstacles to Justice and Accountability
Egypt	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Islamic clerics with connections to the perpetrators can easily and swiftly issue religious conversion and marriage certificates.¹⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Corrupt Muslim authorities collude with and receive bribes from perpetrators to remain silent and refrain from conducting legitimate investigations, or

¹⁶ GirlsNotBrides, "[Child marriage has a significant economic impact, new World Bank research states](#)", 27 June 2017.

¹⁷ *Supra* Note 15.

¹⁸ *Supra* Note 5.

¹⁹ *Supra* Note 4.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trafficking rings are highly organized and are able to conduct reconnaissance and organize the abduction and marriage of girl victims.²⁰ • Egyptian governmental authorities and entities deny the existence of abduction, forced conversion and marriage, creating a lenient environment in which perpetrators can orchestrate and conduct such crimes with relatively little fear of prosecution.²¹ • Per Egyptian Shariah law, a minor girl's conversion to Islam permits her underage marriage, and a woman's conversion to Islam annuls her previous marriages and allows her forced betrothal to her captor.²² 	<p>to report these abducted girls and women as 'missing'²³</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There exists both difficulty and reluctance to differentiate from evident forced marriages and marriages in which the victims consent to marriage on false premises²⁴ • Perpetrators threaten and harass the victims' families in order to prevent their reporting of the abductions²⁵ • Cases in which girls or women are abducted but are swiftly returned garner little to no media attention and therefore no public condemnation and calls for change.²⁶
Nigeria ²⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act of 2015 – which provides women protection against various forms of violence and expands the definition of rape – remains unratified by 23 Nigerian states (out of 36). • Militant groups receive advanced weaponry, such as AK-47s, through illegal arms transfer networks, whereas Nigerian authorities are typically ill-equipped. • The Nigerian government passed a law criminalizing the payment of ransom money for the release of kidnapping victims; rather than prevent further abductions, it punishes families who are doing all they can to retain their stolen girls. Past refusal to pay ransoms have ended in the murder of abducted children. • Nigerian security forces have a track record of ignoring warning signs of imminent mass kidnappings. More than four hours prior to the 2014 Chibok kidnapping of 276 Christian students from Government Girls' Secondary School, authorities were warned of an imminent attack but failed to intervene. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nigeria's Child Rights Act of 2003 prohibits child marriage but falls outside of the discretion of the National Assembly and requires ratification of individual states. 11 Muslim states refuse to ratify the act, citing Islamic scripture which permits marriage of girls after they reach menarche. • The Nigerian government's plan of action in dealing with militants favors rehabilitation and reintegration into society over justice and accountability. Operation Safe Corridor, established in 2016, receives defected former militants, de-radicalizes them, and reintroduces them to society. The program lacks any prosecutorial measures whatsoever, leaving civilians feeling as if militants are receiving amnesty from the government and being permitted to resettle in the very same communities that they terrorized months or years prior. • In October 2022, the Nigerian government secured the release of 23 hostage students kidnapped by Boko Haram militants this year; however, this was only achieved by the government's agreement to release 101 Boko Haram militants from prison.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Aid to the Church in Need, [Hear Her Cries: The kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimization of Christian women and girls](#), 24 November 2021.

²⁷ Jubilee Campaign, [Trafficking in Nigeria: Shadow Report to the United States Department of State](#), February 2022.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Safe Schools Initiative which was launched following the Chibok abductions for the purpose of constructing boundary walls around educational institutions, hiring security guards, and developing rapid response mechanisms, became defunct by 2016 with no clues as to what became of its ≈ 30 million USD in funding. 	
Pakistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In November 2021, under pressure from the wider Muslim community that claims that the abduction, forced conversion, and marriage of faith minority girls is not a real phenomenon, the Pakistani parliament discarded the proposed Forced Conversion Marriages Bill, thus emboldening perpetrators to continue their crimes with impunity.²⁸ Despite Sindh Province’s ratification of the Sindh Marriage Restraint Act of 2013 nearly a decade ago, obstacles remain to the bill’s effective implementation, including insufficient budget for district monitoring committees who offer safety and observe suspicious behavior in order to preemptively prevent abductions and thus marriages of girls.²⁹ In mid-July 2021, the Supreme Court of Pakistan rejected a constitutional petition aiming to offer greater legal and systematic protections to minority girls from abductions and forced marriages.³⁰ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Though the 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act criminalizes child marriage, the punishment (a month of imprisonment and a fine of 1,000 rupees) is insufficiently stringent and permits the marriage of girls as young as 16 years.³¹ A 2019 bill introduced by Pakistani female senator Sherry Rehman to raise the minimum legal marriageable age to 18 years was opposed by some Muslim senators for being “against the Sharia”, according to which “Islam allows marriage before puberty”. Though the bill passed, it was subsequently struck down by the National Assembly.³² Pakistan’s Constitution allows courts across the nation to make judgements in line with Shariah law in cases in which the individuals involved in the case are Muslim. Because the victims are forcibly converted to Islam, their underaged coerced marriages are accepted by Shariah courts. Corrupt Muslim authorities overlook birth certificates as proof of girl victims’ ages, accept falsified documentation, and fail to exercise due diligence when investigating the coercive nature of such marriages.³³

²⁸ Asia News International, [“Pakistan: After bill against forced conversion rejected, 38 cases so far reported this year”](#), 22 November 2021.

²⁹ Hafeez Tunio, [“Law fails to thwart child marriage”](#), *The Express Tribune*, 7 October 2022.

³⁰ Decision Magazine, [“Pakistan High Court Fails to Protect Christian Girls From Forced Conversion, Marriage”](#), 21 July 2021.

³¹ *Supra* Note 18.

³² Naeem Sadiq, [“Eliminating child marriages”](#), *The Express Tribune*, 27 March 2022. ; Javed Hussain, [“Senate sees off religious parties’ opposition to pass bill against child marriage”](#), *Dawn*, 29 April 2019.

³³ *Supra* Note 17.