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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Joint written statement* submitted by Jubilee Campaign, Coptic Solidarity, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[29 May 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

Trafficking of Coptic Christian Women and Girls in the Arab Republic of Egypt

Panel - Annual discussion on Women's Rights (HRC res. 6/30 and 47/15)

Jubilee Campaign, Coptic Solidarity, and Set My People Free would like to raise to the Council's attention the concerning trend by which women and girls, including minors, of the Coptic Christian faith in Egypt are routinely trafficked and forcibly married to Muslim men against their free will. There are an estimated fifty such cases annually, 500 within the past decade, and many victims regrettably still remain disappeared to this day.

Patterns and Trends

Coptic women and girls are largely easily identifiable among a predominantly Muslim population as they do not wear hijabs and often don cross necklaces or other symbolic representations of their Christian faith. According to one common tactic, Muslim men will entice Coptic women and girls into romantic relationships under the guise of legitimate attraction and/or by deceptively promising marriage and a shared future. In reality, however, the perpetrators maintain the true motives until after elopement, at which point the victim learns the reality but is unable to escape due to their "legal" marital ties to their perpetrators, as well as due to the threat of being blackmailed with the release of sexual images and videos taken non-consensually. Without any viable options for nullifying the fraudulent marriages, victims are usually forced to renounce Christianity and convert to their "husbands" Muslim faith. Formalities of "conversion" to Islam, and subsequent changes in Civil Status records (ID, etc.) are then completed in astounding expediency, with obvious facilitators from police and government officials. Typically, the victim appears within days in a video clip, clad in her hijab, announcing that she has found the True Religion, and demanding her family to stay away from her.

Another method of trafficking Coptic Christian women and girls is the use of sheer force and physical intimidation/domination. Muslim men will often map the routines of their victims to determine whether they are suitable victims and at what times and locations they are most vulnerable. With the coordination of other local "Salafist networks", Muslim men are able to then "weave a spider's web around [the girls]". These networks will meet in mosques to strategize how and when to intentionally cross paths with the future victim. Typically, Muslim individuals will be planted in the workplace or in social circles of the girls and women, where they will feign an 'authentic' relationship or friendship. Finally, one of these facilitators - who at that point will have instilled some sense of trust within the victim - will invite the girl or woman to meet her or him at a distant or desolate location, at which point the victim is abducted while traveling and subsequently transported to a hidden location. Often, in apartments rented by the Salafist network, the girl victims are then threatened and coerced into accepting Islam and marrying their captors.

Noteworthy Cases

In 2019, numerous young Coptic women faced the terrors of abduction. This includes 18-year-old Nerges Adel Ibrahim who was shown in video surveillance being kidnapped while walking to attend a lesson. The perpetrator was easily identified as the cousin of one of Nerges' Muslim female friends, however police authorities refused to register a case and investigate. Another Coptic woman, recently married and pregnant 20-year-old Marina Sami Sahi, was kidnapped while she was on the way to visit her doctor for a prenatal checkup. Threatening messages on her phone suggested the involvement of a Muslim man named Ali Trukuller, however, police have not exercised their due diligence to rescue Marina, leaving her husband and father in grief. 23-year-old Coptic woman Sarah Atef disappeared outside of her university campus following her completion of an exam, and upon her family's filing of a case, they were informed that Sarah had been abducted for the purposes of sexual violence and conversion to Islam. Sarah's family soon received a phone call from her in which she asserts that she had converted to Islam and married according to

her own will, but her friends have raised skepticism, citing that Sarah has always been a devoted Christian.

In April 2020, 39-year-old Coptic woman, high school teacher, and mother of three, Ranya Abd al-Masih, was abducted in Menoufia Governorate. For a few days, Ranya's whereabouts remained unknown and her family was in great distress experiencing a feeling of dread which only worsened after Ranya reappeared in a video in which she is wearing a niqab and claiming that she had willingly abandoned her home and family to convert and live as a Muslim woman. Upon further inspection, the video depicts Ranya's evident emotional turmoil and tearful face as she speaks in a script-like manner, which indicated that she was coerced into filming such a video and that the circumstances of her disappearance were entirely nefarious. After spending nearly three months in captivity and suffering, and with the generous assistance of a bishop, Ranya was able to return to her family in June 2020, where she revealed that she was subjected to physical and sexual violence.

Justice Denied

Numerous elements combine to foster a climate of impunity surrounding these horrific cases of abduction and forced religious conversions in Egypt, but the largest contributing factor is the codification of Islam (Article II of the constitution) as the state religion and shari'a as the main source of legislation. Despite the evidence of coercion, deception, and violence involved in these cases, governments and state actors are eager to formalize all conversions to Islam as it is considered a progressive step in expanding Muslim population. Other shari'a provisions can be used to justify these crimes as well, especially those in which children of minority age are permitted to convert to Islam and marry with the permission of a Muslim guardian. "This effectively allows Muslim men to strip Copts of their parental rights and Coptic girls of their constitutional protections [...]"

The Egyptian criminal justice system has failed to protect Coptic citizens and has even been directly complicit in these human rights violations. The government is the responsible party in the issuance of new identification cards to women who converted to Islam, and they have and continue to issue documents formalizing this, disregarding the duress under which such conversions are made. Police have refused to arrest those men responsible for the abductions and forced conversions, even when the perpetrators themselves have confessed either their direct commission of the crime or otherwise their secondary involvement thereof. Courageous families of victims who tenaciously implore authorities to rescue their daughters/sisters/wives, fulfill their duties to investigate filed cases, and apprehend perpetrators for prosecution, have been ignored and even attacked by state actors, including police. The miscarriages of justice discussed in this paragraph were all present in the case of 18-year-old engaged Coptic Christian woman Hanan Adly Girgis who was abducted in January 2017 and who has remained missing in the nearly seven years since.

Since 1863, all cases of religious conversion were decreed by Khedive Ismail to be subject to obligatory "advisory sessions" - usually held in a police center or another suitable government office - between the convert-to-be and some family members as well as a clergy. The purpose was to ensure the person's free will, if an adult; only then could the legal process of faith conversion take place. In case of minors, the conversion was conditional to parents approval. This procedure was "suspended" in 2008, and never returned despite multiple requests.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Jubilee Campaign, Coptic Solidarity, and Set My People Free make the following recommendations to the Egyptian government:

1. Reconstitute obligatory advisory sessions between prospective convert, family member, and clergy, under supervision of a neutral body (such as the National Council for Human Rights).
2. Task specially trained non-local police and prosecutors to follow up on all reported cases that were not properly investigated and recover those abducted.
3. Apprehend and prosecute all individuals, including police, government officials, and Islamic religious groups or authorities, for whom evidence exists of participation or complicity in cases of abductions.

Jubilee Campaign and Coptic Solidarity make the following recommendations to all relevant United Nations Bodies and Special Rapporteurs:

1. Monitor and report on the abduction - in its various forms - forced marriage, and forced religious conversion of minority women and girls in Egypt.
2. Collaborate with the Egyptian government to make an official country visit to investigate this issue.
3. Urge the Egyptian government to fund and partner with specialized civil society groups to provide aftercare to women who have been recovered and to their families. This should include medical care, both physical and extensive mental health care, relocation assistance if requested, and assistance in establishing a new life including assistance with education and or job placement.

Set My People Free, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.

[Primary Source]: Coptic Solidarity, *'Jihad of the Womb': Trafficking of Coptic Women & Girls in Egypt*, September 2020.