



*When the Church Exacerbates
the Suffering of Persecution*

In religious persecution, women suffer differently from men. The pressures that a woman faces because of her faith in Christ are directly tied to her worth or importance as a female in her culture. In most contexts where I work, the societal roles of men and women vary widely between genders. Whether she is a Believer from Muslim Background (BMB) or from a Christian background, her culture's way of defining her worth as a female becomes her vulnerability in persecution. But what if, on top of the suffering she faces in persecution, her Christian faith-community reinforces those same patterns of behaviour and beliefs as the surrounding culture? What if identity and relational beliefs that are not based on biblical, godly principles shape our identity and relationships in church? When patterns of distorted beliefs about and behaviours towards men and women shape our relationships inside the church, gender-specific dynamics of persecution are enabled to continued inside the church. I invite you to reflect with me on the gender-specific nature of persecution and the complicity of the body of Christ in finishing the work of the persecutor²¹ as I have seen it in ministry work in the Middle East. Furthermore, how we can begin to address distorted beliefs regarding men and women's identities in order to strengthen persecuted believers.

In 2018, I was co-leading a training for a group of women ministry leaders in a Middle Eastern country. The women were mapping out all the different types of persecution they face in various spheres of life, domestic, extended family, community

²¹ Helene Fisher and Elizabeth Lane Millar, *For the Survival of the Church: What Our Theology Has to Do with Persecution*, CBE International, June 15, 2020, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/article/mutuality-blog-magazine/survival-church-what-our-theology-has-do-persecution>.

(work, school, public transport, shops etc.) and authorities-related etc., for a new training approach we were piloting. One of the women piped up “We have to talk about church! Can I add the category ‘church’ to the list?” ‘Church’ was added, and the women continued working away in their groups as many were thrilled that for the first time they were systematically discussing and listing the pressures they face, often on a daily basis. When we started to analyse what they had written on large wall-sized posters I asked the lady why it was important for her to have added the category ‘church.’ It was as if a storm had blown into the room and a number of women literally stood up and started waving their arms about. They pointed around the room at all the posters they had filled with the types of abuse, manipulation, silencing, threats, physical violence that women experience. Then they explained: “Everything we’ve written about what happens outside of church also happens in church, except that on top of enduring it in the place where we shouldn’t have to endure any of this... on top of that we’re supposed to be perfect as well...!”

This experience brought home to me how complex religious persecution is—it’s not a linear narrative of an individual suffering at the hands of persecutors for Christ’s sake. We’ve been exploring this as a collection of practitioners, academics and advocates since 2016, when we drafted the first Call to the Church on the topic.²² Three elements of suffering in the gender-specific experience of religious persecution become apparent, as I have seen them in the Middle East over the past 25 years and as we are addressing them in our ministry today: firstly, that the experience of

²² Emma Dipper, “The journey to a Gender and Religious Freedom Network,” *Gender and Religious Freedom*, International Journal of Religious Freedom 9, Issue 1/2, 2016, https://www.iirf.eu/site/assets/files/116862/vol9_2016.pdf.

persecution is very different for men and women; secondly, that false identity beliefs function as conduits of persecution; and lastly, how the effects of persecution are crushed in gender resilience.

Persecution affects women and men differently

Since 2018, annual research demonstrates and describes how men and women suffer differently in religious persecution. The 2020 Gender-Specific Religious Persecution (GSRP) Analysis²³ catalogues the different forms of persecution and discrimination by gender; the top Pressure Points for men across 50 countries are physical violence, economic harassment, and incarceration by government, while for women top Pressure Points are sexual violence, forced marriage, and physical violence. The GSRP Analysis reports that when studying the recorded lists of pressures and violations believers suffer in persecution, a pattern emerges: persecution often blends in with structural or systemic levels of control or violence for a given context. This seems to be the case more strongly for women where most of the pressures are suffered in private, family, and domestic spheres of life, and therefore by nature invisible to an observer. The 2020 report underlines this as follows:

(...) women and girls experience persecution – at its peak – as a kind of invisible “living death” (rape, forced marriage, house arrest). In these instances, sexual violence is used both as a form of control and punishment.

²³ Helene Fisher, Elizabeth Lane Miller, and Eva Mayer, “Gender-specific Religious Persecution: Analysis and Implications,” *World Watch Research*, February 2020. Available at: <http://opendoorsanalytical.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/GLOBAL-Gender-specific-religious-persecution-report-2020.pdf> (password: freedom)

The goal is not to prove that women suffer more than men (how can we adequately measure the cost of suffering of an individual man or woman?), but to create awareness that the nature of suffering in persecution between men and women is often completely different, and, therefore, has implications for how we serve them. Where an unmarried male convert might get sent off by his family to another city to give him time to ‘come to his senses,’ a single female convert may get locked up by her family and treated like an animal, or married off quickly to make sure her bad, shameful decision is quickly forgotten in a forged family celebration.

Possibly the biggest strategic finding from uncovering the gender-specific nature of persecution is the fact that persecution plays into the definition of what it means to be a good, strong, or successful woman or man in any given cultural context. For a woman in a general Middle Eastern context, though there are regional differences, obvious indicators are: submissiveness; obedience; virgin at marriage; (reputation of) whom she marries; bearing many children, especially boys, and preferably the first one to be a son; raising her children in a way that brings honour to the family; speaks with a soft voice, etc. When I lived in the Middle East, I frequently encountered and experienced societal gender definitions. We had two small daughters, but I was asked nearly daily when I would ‘bring a son.’ And when our son was born, the first thing my neighbour said to me peering into the car seat as I came home from the hospital *“now you need to bring him a brother.”* In this context my duties were clear: a good wife and mother brings her husband sons, and her son a brother. After our son was born, simple daily routines like getting groceries changed completely. Our fun little outings to the local shops with the girls skipping ahead picking their way through the small, fully crammed stores became something of a nightmare. Where previously our daughters were met with smiles, kind words, a sweet or a piece of fruit, that all

stopped and the still nursing baby boy would be laden with lollipops, chewing gum, ice-cream, and whatever else could be laid upon the sleeping infant, much to the disgust of his sisters who were left bewildered at what was going on. The message to our young daughters was clear: boys count, you don't!

Within the wide variety of regional and national Middle East and North Africa (MENA) cultures, I often don't see much difference between women from Muslim or Christian background, so I've concluded that general culture is often stronger than religious denomination. As the top Pressure Point for women in persecution is sexual violence, it's easy to see how targeting this prized possession of sexual purity, on which not only her honour, but more often the whole family's honour depends, not only strips the targeted woman of her dignity, socio-cultural value and future prospects, but can also move a whole (family) community into action to hide the shame of her lost purity by locking her away, marrying her off, divorcing her, taking her children away, leaving her on the streets, or having license to abuse her even more now that she is considered damaged goods.

The identity lies we believe in are conduits of persecution

As we sit with groups of women around the MENA region analysing gender-specific religious persecution, they come to the realisation that the success of persecution lies in their belief in given identity norms and values. When a Christ-follower believes that her sexual purity is a defining factor of her God-given value, it becomes the focal point of her and her family's protection. Many women tell me that when something bad happens, whatever or wherever, they are often blamed for that bad fortune; how easily will a woman accept the blame for persecution that happens to her and accept it's her own fault! I first heard an explicit framework for how this was part of

persecutor's strategy to destroy the church in 2017²⁴ and this was the beginning of a close and vital partnership with the authors. Their work and journey had begun in 2015 in the Central African Republic²⁵ and grew closely out of what they had observed there.²⁶ I could see how closely it mirrored the gender dynamic I had lived with in the Middle East and decided that, together, we might just be able to untangle what seemed to be a hopeless, hurtful mess. The rest of this reflection shares insights from this work by Miller and Fisher, now called *Restorations*²⁷ (all italics below directly borrowed with permission), and how it is currently re-shaping our understanding of true and false identity beliefs, and redefining persecution resilience with our sisters and brothers around the region. This is the material we were piloting in the 2018 training which got the women so excited.

The good...

The God who created the heavens and earth and everything held between, created man and woman with specific identity truths: *our value derives directly from us being God's image-bearers; our purpose comes from our commissioning as allies – man and woman – to be fruitful, have dominion and not be alone; our limits are found in God's good limits; we are given authority by God, in submission to him, to rule over the earth; our innocence comes from God who made us pure, naked without shame!* Just read Genesis 1 and 2. It's

²⁴ Helene Fisher, and Elizabeth Lane Miller, "A Biblical and Theological Framework for Christian women under pressure for their faith," *Consultation on Christian Women under Pressure for their Faith II*, Unpublished paper, 2017.

²⁵ Helene Fisher, Elizabeth Lane Miller E.L., and C. Sauer, "Wounded because of religion: Identifying the components of gender-specific religious persecution of Christians," *Mission Studies* 37, no. 3, 2020.

²⁶ Christof Sauer, "Breaking the Cycle of Shame for persecuted Christian women: Reflections on African realities in global perspective," *Missionalia*, 2020.

²⁷ Elizabeth Lane Miller, and Helene Fisher, *Restorations Essentials: Facilitator's Guide*, Open Doors, 2021.

all there laid out plainly, but over-and-over as I read it with women, it's as if they hear the God-given truths for the first time in their life, as if they've always been blinded to these plain truths.

The bad...

When these God-given identity truths degenerate through the cunning tactics of the father of all lies, death and darkness are at hand: by twisting the true words of God and using blatant lies, the devil creates distrust and suspicion in Eve and Adam of God and of each other, leading to utter destruction of beautifully crafted relationships. Rejecting our creator has not only brought us broken identity areas, but it has left us with broken patterns of relationship. Broken ways that we relate to one another in everyday life.

Genesis 3 shows the result:

*Our Value and Status distort from something that we are, to something that we strive for. This results in some people achieving better status than others. Our relationships become characterized by **inequality**.*

*Our Purpose and Unity distort from being allies with joint purpose to enmity. Our individual roles become our purpose in life; it seems safer to be alone. Our relationships become characterized by **distrust**.*

*Our Freedom and Limits distort from freedom with limits to freedom from limits. We become judge of the good limits: adding new limits or rejecting all limits. Our relationships become characterized by **blame**.*

*Our Authority and Submission distort from shared authority given by God to competition for authority. We compete for authority and try to force the submission of others. Our relationships become characterized by **control**.*

*Our Innocence and Acceptance distort from living without shame to rejection. We try to do anything to hide our shame and reject those who expose us to shame. Our relationships become characterized by **shame**.*

The ugly...

One of the devastating discoveries fellow believers, men and women, make about themselves is realising that gender identity beliefs, and thereby relationships within the body of Christ, are often founded upon the identity lies that stem from Genesis 3. Consequently, one reads Genesis 3:16-19 as if God changed his mind about what he called 'very good.' We then end up with a 'new normal' for men and women in the five identity areas above:

Inequality: *Women are a lesser, men a fuller, reflection of God's image.*

Distrust: *Women cannot be trusted. Men are more trustworthy.*

Blame: *Women need additional limits to allow men to live in freedom.*

Control: *Authority is masculine. Submission is feminine.*

Shame: *His honour and acceptance is based on her sexual purity (sexual innocence).*

When we believe these to be our identity truths within the body of Christ, the dynamics of persecution continue inside the church. In certain circumstances, the rejection a Christian woman might come to expect from the surrounding non-Christian community looks similar to the rejection from the Christian community. For example, an unmarried BMB who has been thrown out of her father's house because of her conversion might be understood to be similar to a prostitute, and therefore up for grabs, by fellow Christians because she's not residing under the roof of a male guardian. Or, a woman kidnapped and raped as an act of persecution can also be shamed and/or shunned by the Christian community upon her return to her Christian home. Or, a woman discriminated against in education or the workplace because of her Christian faith could also be viewed with suspicion by her Christian community, wondering what she has done (distrust) and believing she can only have herself to blame for this ill-fate. We've started to call this the ripple effect of persecution.

The consequences of an act of persecution against a believer are not limited to her or his personal sphere, but overflow into all areas of life, sometimes even with inter-generational effects. Here the complicity of the church becomes clear: instead of calling us to the foot of the cross of Christ where all shame, guilt and fear have been overcome, the place where we can freely minister healing to the ones broken in persecution for Christ's sake, we often encounter stories that the shame continues, blame is cast, acceptance becomes conditional, and the love and unity of harmonious relationships within the body of Christ sometimes become irreparably damaged.

Crushing the effects of persecution through gender resilience

I've sat with groups of women who will all acknowledge that they know how to effectively 'deal' with any issues that bring shame, guilt or fear to their family or community—they are conditioned to hide it or somehow get rid of it. In the years I've been shaping my ministry using the framing of *Restorations*, Romans 12:2 has been our pivotal verse: Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will (NIV). How easily do we assume that we are transformed, and our minds are renewed? Yet how infrequently do we analyse where and how we are still conforming to the pattern of the world? I've sat with numerous groups of women from MENA to map out the pattern of their world with them. As we go through simple exercises pertaining to socio-cultural mindset about women and men, gently moving to the analysis of this mindset within Christian communities, the realisation sets in that, more often than not, we believe the lies of Genesis 3 within the church about ourselves, towards others and about God. I've spoken to countless women who do not know that God's will is good, pleasing, and perfect towards them. When this is the state of a church in a context of persecution, they are utterly vulnerable.

I believe that in Christ our true resilience resides. When we turn to Christ and study how Christ restores relationship with our self, each other and God, a model of restoration for the body of Christ and all relationships held within it rise up, like cream on milk: rich, beautiful, and fragrant, and a memory of what is to come. When we read about the encounters Jesus had with women and men in the gospels, they breathe *equality, trust, freedom, empowerment, and acceptance*. These words are life-giving antidote to the lies from Genesis 3. The behaviour that results from these restoration

words restores honour and peace, the essence of harmonious relationship. When these healing words are practised within the church, our identity beliefs and then our behaviour towards each other changes:

Equality – our value is something we all receive in Christ, equally reflecting Christ in us.

Trust – in unity our purpose is to build the kingdom, entrusted with gifts by the Holy Spirit.

Freedom – freedom and life in Christ are offered freely to all men and women – no conditions necessary.

Empowerment – in submission to Christ, men and women are jointly empowered by the Holy Spirit, with Christ's servant leadership as the model for both men and women.

Acceptance – We are radically accepted in Christ; men and women stand justified and give all honour to Christ.

The evil one's endgame of persecution is not just to persecute individual believers, but is to break the bonds of love and unity within the body of Christ – to smash the beautiful bride of Christ. When I look at the church in MENA, I hear this command of Jesus in my ear: A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my

disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34,35 NIV). Did Jesus give us an impossible command, or are we simply unwilling to lay down our own lives and take up our crosses daily to fulfil it?

Side by side in ministry, several colleagues and I have been on the journey for several years—feeling the pain of these distortions and seeking the freedom of Christ’s restorations. We’ve been seeking collaboratively, across organisations, to explicitly name the patterns of the world and live out transformed renewal of our minds as One Body. Living out this renewed view of our identity as a Christian male or Christian female in Christ frees us from the heavy burden of societal expectations – frees us from shame or guilt that Christ has already redeemed. It allows us not only to live as actually redeemed ourselves, but to gracefully chose to view fellow Christians, women and men, as new creations in Christ, without judgement, blame, shame, or control. In MENA we’re beginning to see the ripples of transformed minds and lives as churches rethink their calling to be restorative places for both men and women. This is our hope, which we pray will strengthen and preserve Christ’s bride as a true witness to the Father’s good and loving character, in every context where our faith is most acutely under attack.