

WORLD: ‘Double suffering’ when women targeted not only for gender, but also religion

By Olivia Jackson

World Watch Monitor (08.03.2017) – <http://bit.ly/2nekZz0> – On International Women’s Day, one statistic you may not hear much is that 83% of global women identify with a religious faith.

Pew Research asked people in 84 countries how often they pray; in half of them, substantially more women than men say they pray on a daily basis.

And yet one of the under-reported aspects of the global Church under pressure around the world is that, when conflict comes to their local community, those same women can be subject to the double discrimination of not only being targeted for their gender, but also for their faith.

A year ago, a special conference focusing on this issue heard how women are being increasingly targeted as a deliberate strategy to rob them of their faith and their identity.

Records of women being systematically targeted in order to undermine “opposing” groups, in both armed conflict and inter-communal tension, stretch back millennia.

From dictating rules by which “other” women must live, through to sexual assault and forced pregnancy, prostitution and marriage, the power of this targeting is clear: women who survive are injured, traumatised and shamed.

Those enduring sexual violence may then be ostracised from their community. They may bear the perpetrator’s child or contract infection. Existing children are left motherless, husbands without wives, and, for unmarried men, the availability of brides is reduced. So men receive the enemy’s message clearly: you cannot protect your community.

While religion is not often given as the sole reason for viewing a community as “other”, gender-based violence (GBV for short) does occur along religious lines.

In the recent war in the Central African Republic, women were specifically targeted both for their faith and their gender.

Despite an end to the civil war, predominantly Hindu Tamil women in northern Sri Lanka allegedly continue to be raped by Buddhist Sinhalese government forces, and young female Karen teachers in Myanmar have been raped and murdered by Buddhist Burmese Army soldiers.

ISIS abducted and abused many Christians and Yazidi women, just as Boko Haram is doing with Christians.

And records show that up to 50,000 women (and unknown numbers

of men) were raped in the Balkan war of the 90s. The vast majority of these were Muslim, their attackers Christian.

Very few women who face this violence find recourse to justice. In war, chaos prevents prosecution, and, post-conflict, a combination of shame, trauma, fear of retribution and lack of access to legal structures stop women seeking redress, even where political will to prosecute exists.

Domestic laws may be inadequate and international frameworks, while valuable, are difficult to access and take years to prosecute: by September 2016, the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia had only managed to convict 32 people for crimes of sexual violence during the conflict.

Humanitarian law has not traditionally treated what happens to women as seriously as what happens to (predominantly male) combatants. The Geneva Conventions term sexual violence as “outrages against personal dignity” rather than a crime of violence.

Convention IV, concerning civilians, puts the onus on warring parties to protect women “against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape, enforced prostitution, or any form of indecent assault”, rather than an outright prohibition of these crimes. This wording additionally implies stigma attached to women whose honour is attacked.

Recent changes to the Geneva Conventions, initiated by William Hague and Angelina Jolie, have specifically named rape as a

“grave breach” – the most serious violation, obliging all Convention signatories to prosecute regardless of where the violation took place. However, grave breaches do not apply to civil war, or non-conflict zones such as refugee camps.

In peacetime, women have the remote chance to use legal “instruments” such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, if their government has ratified this. But they must primarily rely on domestic laws to be adequate and enforced.

This is particularly unreliable if a woman has been subjected to GBV due to religious reasons in countries where the overwhelming majority of the population adheres to one religion. In Pakistan, Hindu and Christian communities report that girls are kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam and marry Muslim men.

Despite laws against forced conversion and underage marriage, few girls return home: most families are too poor or lack the education to access legal help, or have their cases overruled.

New penalties against forced conversion, passed by the Sindh state legislature in 2016, were vetoed by the Governor after pressure from Islamist groups. Some laws exacerbate women’s situations: Myanmar law bars Rohingya women from having more than two children, or any children out of wedlock.

While this paints a grim picture of the use of GBV in religious persecution, the fact that GBV itself is

increasingly reported is testament to its rising status. International humanitarian law in particular has progressed since the 1990s. But the problem of inadequate, remote or unenforceable laws remains a major barrier to both deterrence and justice for such an effective instrument of persecution.

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