

**ESCALATING VIOLENCE AGAINST COPTIC WOMEN AND GIRLS: WILL
THE NEW EGYPT BE MORE DANGEROUS THAN THE OLD?**

**“The Disappearance, Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages of Coptic
Christian Women and Girls in Egypt”**

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Mr. Chairman, it is an honor to be invited to testify once more on this most important issue of the disappearances, forced conversions and forced marriages of Coptic Christian women and girls. I would like to express my thanks to the Commission for holding this hearing and launching this new report. I would also like to express my thanks to Christian Solidarity International, and in particular to Dr. John Eibner, CEO, for championing this issue and sponsoring the research and writing of the report we are discussing here. I would also like to express my thanks to Nadia Ghaly, the co-author of this report, who is not able to be here today, for her invaluable collaboration in this effort.

My testimony is based directly on the report introduced today, **“The Disappearance, Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages of Coptic Christian Women and Girls in Egypt II”**, and I would therefore like to request that the report be included along with my testimony into the record of these hearings.

Coptic women in Egypt are disappearing from their homes, their schools and their jobs. They go missing while returning from church, picking up their children from school or traveling to the sick bed of an aging parent. They are often held as captives, subjected to physical and psychological abuse in the form of rapes, beatings, domestic labor without pay, forced marriage and conversion to Islam. Their lives, and the lives of their families, are severely damaged.

The Egyptian government has distanced itself from any responsibility or culpability. Those who dispute these claims assert that the disappearances are merely willful acts of young women seeking to leave oppressive home environments and that there is no criminal activity involved.

To investigate these claims, Christian Solidarity International and the Coptic Foundation for Human Rights Commissioned a report written in November 2009 which asserted that Coptic women and underage girls are deceptively lured into forced marriages with Muslim men and conversion to Islam; that the Egyptian authorities dismiss the criminality of such events; that the young women are presumed to be complicit in their disappearances; that the disappearances follow consistent patterns; that the Egyptian

government rarely restores their Christian identities to women who have been forcibly converted to Islam.

This report marked the beginning of renewed discussion on the topic, including a hearing in front of this very Commission last summer.

Other US Government agencies were more skeptical.

For example, the 2010 US Department of States Annual Trafficking in Persons Report referenced our report, and stated that “During the reporting period, an international NGO released a report about alleged forced marriages of Coptic females in Egypt, indicating an allegation of forced prostitution, though the allegations have not been confirmed.”

The 2010 Department of State’s International Religious Freedom Report also referred to our report, stating,

“As in previous years, there were occasional claims of Muslim men forcing Coptic women and girls to convert to Islam. Reports of such cases were disputed and often included inflammatory allegations and categorical denials of kidnapping and rape. In November 2009 an international Christian advocacy group published a report regarding alleged cases of forced conversion; however, well-respected local human rights groups were unable to verify such cases and found it extremely difficult to determine whether compulsion was used, as most cases involved a female Copt who converted to Islam when she married a male Muslim. Reports of such cases almost never appear in the local media.”

Before entering in the details of the new report, I would like to make one important point: Claims that all disappearances are the result of impulsive behaviors and not abduction reflect a misunderstanding of the force, fraud and coercion that are characteristic of the relationships between young Coptic women and girls and their captors. Both Nadia Ghaly and I recognize that not all disappearances are the result of abductions, that not all marriages are forced, and that some conversions can be consensual. We have spoken with a young woman who quite candidly left her husband because he beat her while her make Muslim neighbor was kind. She eventually returned to her family.

However, and notwithstanding the ambiguity of many situations we encountered, we claim that it is not possible to dismiss each case in the 2009 report on the grounds that the girls willingly and left their families.

And, since this first report, it is possible to say that stories of abductions and disappearances of Coptic women and girls are for the first time garnering attention in the mainstream media. On December 15, 2010, the BBC aired a documentary entitled, “Christian Minority under Pressure in Egypt.” In the opening scene, a father relates to the interviewer that there will be no Christmas in their home this year; their daughter, who loved Christmas, was abducted and has never returned.

On June 15, 2011, Yasmin el Rashdi, writing *New York Review of Books* on June 15, 2011, quotes a parish priest who raises the issue of the disappearance of young Coptic women.

“There are no sizable attacks,” he said, “but each week there are incidents of women having the cross grabbed from their necks as they walk in the streets. In this very neighborhood people are still being insulted as they leave church; and we still have young girls disappearing, kidnapped, being harassed for what they are wearing or for bearing the cross tattooed on their wrists.”

Since the publication of our first report, the political landscape has changed considerably in Egypt. The Coptic community has become more vulnerable to persecution as a result of an upsurge in militant Islam following the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak. Emigration is increasing and asylum petitions in both the United States and other countries are on the rise. Young Coptic women are particularly vulnerable. Exploitation thrives in times of political unrest.

Among the most vulnerable members of this beleaguered community are women and young girls. Young Coptic women are applying for asylum on the basis of fear of being abducted and forced to convert and marry. In September 2011, I testified in federal court as an expert witness in one such asylum case. Asylum was granted for a young Coptic woman on the basis of fear of being abducted should she return. Other immigration lawyers attest to recent favorable asylum decisions based on threat or fear of abduction. We have here, as witnesses in this hearing, two young women who have sought and received asylum because of abduction and fear of abductions. These cases are not allegations.

A Second Report

Concerned with the escalating violence against the Copts in Egypt and dissatisfied with the lack of response from the US Government, Christian Solidarity International commissioned a second report, which we are launching here today. This new report substantiates our earlier findings. In addition, we have observed changes in trends and patterns, which reinforce the pre-meditation of the captors.

The goal of our second report is straightforward: To continue to support the claims of disappearances, abductions and forced conversions and forced marriages of Coptic women in Egypt and continue to challenge the use of the term “allegation” in US government reports.

The new findings in the report are based on:

1. Interviews with four Egyptian lawyers. These lawyers provided access to claims filed by families on behalf of Coptic women who had disappeared as well as young women who had returned from a forced marriage and conversion and were attempting to regain their Christian identities;
2. Interviews with representatives of civil society organizations;
3. Interviews with family members of young women who have disappeared. Some of these individuals are represented by attorneys;

4. A review of Internet sites reporting the disappearance of Coptic girls. The authors considered only those cases with appropriate documentation, including police reports.
5. Interviews with women who have returned from a forced marriage and conversion.

All interviews were conducted from November 16-25, 2011, in Cairo, Egypt. Only verifiable cases are included in this report. Each of these cases is verifiable through attorney files, personal interviews and police reports. *The real names of young women and their family members and other identifying details are not published in this report in order to protect their identities.*

Key Findings

1. The number of disappearances and abductions appear to be increasing.

Exact numbers of cases throughout the country are difficult to come by for reasons analyzed below. However, each of the attorneys interviewed for this report indicated an increase in his caseload since January 2011. Four attorneys collectively report a total of over 550 cases of abductions, disappearances and petitions to restore Christian identity following abductions, forced marriages and forced conversions over a five-year period. Furthermore, one attorney interviewed for this report indicates first-hand knowledge of over 1,600 cases of Christians petitioning to have their conversions to Islam overturned in recent years, with 60% of this number being women; in other words, 960 women are petitioning to have their Christian identities restored.

Data Collection Challenges

There is no systematic data repository within the Coptic community documenting the disappearances of young women. Priests or bishops keep records of activities within their churches and communities. Attorneys maintain their own caseloads. Activists maintain different websites but there is no cross-referencing with other data sources.

Families of victims do not report all cases. The police do not register all complaints filed by family members. In many cases, family members of missing young women reported that the police would not file a report until a lawyer intervened. In other cases, families do not file reports because they do not believe that their claims will be taken seriously or because they fear retribution by the authorities. Not all families are financially able to secure the services of an attorney; while not a guarantee of results, the presence of an attorney would at least enable the filing of a legitimate claim.

2. Fewer girls appear to be returning to their families

Our 2009 report focused on young women who had returned from forced marriages and conversions and were struggling to regain their Christian identities. They reported instances of abuse and forced domestic servitude; one woman reported being prostituted by her captor. Since then, there has been a discernible change in the dynamics of the disappearances of young Coptic women. Attorneys handling such cases report that fewer young women are being returned to their families. There is speculation that young women might be trafficked overseas, but attorneys and activists have not yet been able to document this phenomenon.

3. Social Media

Many families are learning about their daughters' conversion to Islam through new Internet sites which document the conversion to Islam of Christian girls. Increasing websites are appearing which feature fully veiled young Coptic women and girls announcing their conversion to Islam. On the other hand, Coptic families are beginning to post announcements of disappearances also on the internet.

4. Minors and mothers of young children appear to be increasingly targeted.

In addition to disappearances of single young women over the age of 18, lawyers report an increase in the abductions of mothers with young children. While the age of consent to convert to a different religion is eighteen in Egypt, there are increasing reports that children of mothers who are forced to convert are also registered as Muslims. Even if a mother returns to her community, the children are considered by law to be Muslim and will remain Muslim.

5. Disappearances are organized and planned.

Attorneys, social workers and members of the clergy interviewed for this and the previous report all attest to organized and systematic planning in cases of missing Coptic women. Tactics to lure young women into relationships follow similar patterns throughout the country. One lawyer interviewed for this report stated that the same man's name occurred in several police reports; he married five Christian women who subsequently converted to Islam. Family members report that their daughters or sisters were befriended by a schoolmate, a neighbor, or an older mother figure over time. Lawyers indicate that their clients report that the families of the captors benefited materially; frequently, family members were provided with new apartments or furniture, and unemployable young men were given jobs.

6. Abductors target vulnerable women and girls, and girls in vulnerable and unprotected moments.

The concluding observations of the UN's Commission on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) express concern "at the very limited information and statistics provided about vulnerable groups of women and girls" in Egypt.

Coptic women and girls are vulnerable in the following ways:

1. They are members of a religious minority.
2. They come from closed, insular communities.
3. Their minority status is the basis for legal and social discrimination

Coptic women and girls are vulnerable because of their minority status, yet little effort is made by the Egyptian Government to document this vulnerability or its consequences.

7. Captors sever contact between victims and their families.

The first task of the captor is to come between a young woman and members of her family. They can do this by force, taking away her phone and family connections. They lock her up, denying her any mobility. They threaten her, telling her that, even if she runs away, her family will never accept her; they will punish her and put her in a monastery. Eventually a young woman is brainwashed and believes that she will be safe only with her Muslim captor. Ultimately, she will be truly safe only if she converts to Islam. Because there is no obligation for a Christian woman who marries a Muslim man to convert to Islam, one attorney claims that conversion is the ultimate goal of the captivity.

8. Captors make use of measures involving force, fraud and coercion.

A young woman consents to a glass of sugar cane juice and the attention of a man whose words promise a life of love, ease and provision. Another woman shares a with a mother who is also waiting for children after school. And a third seeks friendship and escape from a harsh and sometimes abusive home environment. Victims who have not literally been abducted nonetheless did not consent to being ripped from their family without the possibility of ever seeing them again; nor do they consent to being forcibly converted to a religion other than their own. They do not consent to a life of captivity within one small apartment, every outing supervised by a member of her new husband's family. They said yes to the things that young women say yes to: friendship, romance, hope, a future, safety and security. It is reasonable to expect that most young women would respond in precisely the same way as many young Coptic girls responded to these offers of friendship or romance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In developing recommendations for this report, the authors consulted with attorneys and civil society actors in Egypt in order to assess what government actions might support their efforts to protect Coptic women from falling into captivity and, as a result, into forced marriages and conversions. There was considerable consensus as to steps that the government might take.

Egyptian Government

1. Local police stations will take seriously and file reports on all claims of disappearance of Coptic women and girls. All claims will be investigated and family members kept apprised of the progress of each of these cases.
2. The Egyptian national government will request an annual accounting of all cases of disappearances including open and ongoing cases as well as any prosecutions that resulted from local police investigations.
3. The Egyptian government will create a registry to document the disappearance of minors.
4. Children of parents who convert will retain the religion of their birth until they are 18 years of age, the legal age of consent.
5. The legal age for conversion to Islam will be raised to 18, which is the age of legal consent in Egypt.

6. Laws which penalize discrimination based on religion in the areas of education, employment and the media will be enacted.

Coptic Church

1. The Coptic Church will maintain a central registry documenting instances of disappearances, abductions and forced marriages and conversions of Coptic women.
2. The Coptic Community will educate families and young women on the recruitment and deception patterns that lead to captivity.

International Community

1. A legal defense fund will be created to enable Coptic families to secure the presence of an attorney.
2. International or national agencies assessing the situation of Coptic women in Egypt will recognize that coercion and fraud are represented in most cases of disappearance, forced marriages and forced conversions, all of which obviate the consent of the victim.
3. International organizations will recognize both the scope and scale of the problem and no longer refer to such offenses as mere “allegations.”

Mr. Chairman and members of the Commission, I thank you for your time and interest in this very important matter. I look forward to answering your questions.