
International Development Committee: Women, Peace and Security Inquiry

Open Doors UK and Ireland

Context

1. [Open Doors UK & Irelandⁱ](#) is part of an international NGO network which has for 70 years supported and strengthened persecuted Christians. We work in over 70 countries worldwide, in close consultation with church leaders and other Christians who experience first-hand the denial of their religious liberty, as upheld by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Our aim is for freedom of religion to be recognised as a fundamental human right, covering not only private worship, but also the public practice of religion without fear. We believe that this right must be taken seriously in global affairs, to the benefit of Christians and others across the world who are persecuted for their faith or belief.
2. The UK has a strong foundation in Women, Peace and Security (WPS) leadership, but to maintain that leadership it must address the compounded vulnerabilities of Christian and other religious minority women. The failure to integrate FoRB into WPS policies not only weakens the UK's global commitments but leaves some of the most persecuted and silenced women without support or recognition. By adopting a WPS policy that includes religious identity as a key vulnerability the UK can ensure its efforts are both inclusive and sustainable.

Question 7: What are the current trends that can be observed in respect of adherence of the international WPS agenda? What role does the UK play on an international scale, and how can this be improved?

Overlooking Religious Identity

3. Globally, adherence to the WPS shows mixed progress. While more governments and multilateral institutions have adopted National Action Plans and recognised the value of gender-inclusive peacebuilding, there remain gaps in implementation. The experience of women facing vulnerabilities due to their faith, ethnicity, or other identities is frequently excluded from WPS policy and programming.
4. One of the clearest blind spots is the failure to acknowledge religious identity as a critical vulnerability in conflict-affected and repressive states. Women from religious minority backgrounds are disproportionately subject to gender-based violence, exploitation, and marginalisation during conflict. Yet, these experiences are rarely disaggregated in data collection or prioritised in policy responses.
5. Findings from Open Doors' [Gender-Specific Religious Persecution Report 2024ⁱⁱ](#) show that in 78 countries, women and girls from Christian communities were subjected to gender-specific religious persecution. Common violations include forced marriage, sexual violence, abduction, forced conversion, and systematic social exclusion, often with impunity. Violations are often community, or family-driven, making them harder to detect and less likely to be reported through official channels. These patterns clearly

intersect with the WPS agenda but remain unaddressed in its implementation at both national and international levels.

6. The [UK WPS national action plan 2023 to 2027](#)ⁱⁱⁱ states in its foreword that the “Women, Peace and Security agenda is about building a more representative and effective approach to tackling conflict”. A plan that doesn’t consider religious identity risks whole communities in fragile states or conflict zones being overlooked.

The UK’s Role on the International Stage

7. The UK is a leading voice in the WPS agenda, with leadership demonstrated through successive National Action Plans, diplomatic efforts, and targeted programming. However, the UK’s approach continues to treat religion and gender as separate policy silos, despite clear evidence that they interact in ways that directly shape women’s experience of peace and security.
8. This limitation was highlighted in the UK’s [International Women and Girls Strategy 2023–2030](#)^{iv}, which does not reference faith-based vulnerabilities, religion, or FoRB. This is despite the Government’s commitment to FoRB, as made at the [2022 International Ministerial on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)^v, and FoRB being a foreign policy priority for the FCDO. **A cohesive international strategy on women’s rights must include faith as an aspect of identity, particularly in conflict settings where religious discrimination can drive violence.**

Case Studies

9. **Nigeria:** In northern Nigeria, Boko Haram, ISWAP, and Fulani militants continue to abduct and forcibly convert Christian women. These women are often subjected to rape, forced marriage, and psychological torture. Survivors returning to their communities’ face ostracism and rejection, compounding their trauma. Nigeria ranks among the top countries where gender-specific religious persecution is both severe and systematic.
10. **Iran:** In the Islamic Republic of Iran, women who convert from Islam to Christianity face harassment, arrest, and imprisonment for engaging in religious activity. Christian women are denied legal protections and face severe social penalties from their families and communities. Christian gatherings are regularly raided, and women are interrogated and intimidated by authorities. This form of persecution is both state-driven and gender-specific.
11. **Central African Republic:** In CAR, Christian women face violence from both rebel groups and communal actors. There are documented cases of targeted sexual violence, abductions, and intimidation by armed militias during community raids. In areas of contested control, women who are visibly associated with Christian identity are disproportionately affected, but no formal protection mechanisms exist to address these abuses.

Recommendations

12. **We recommend that the UK Government:**
 - a. Recognise religious identity as a key risk factor in conflict-affected settings, including in WPS assessments and programme design.

- b. Support inclusive consultation processes that ensure Christian women and other women who are vulnerable due to their religious identity from conflict zones are heard and represented.
- c. Champion the integration of FoRB into international WPS frameworks, including in JACS assessments, future UK National Action Plans, and at the United Nations (particularly during the UPR process).
- d. Ensure UK aid-funded WPS programming incorporates religion-sensitive vulnerability analysis.

Question 8: What can the UK Government do to ensure that its WPS efforts are sustainable long-term, particularly in light of global political shifts?

13. The sustainability of the UK's WPS efforts depends on the extent to which these policies and programmes are equipped to respond to evolving threats and forms of discrimination that disproportionately affect women from religious minorities. While the UK's commitment to gender equality and women's rights is long-standing, sustainability requires adaptability, particularly as global political trends increasingly marginalise women who hold religious identities that are different from the majority view. Across many contexts, women of Christian faith are facing intensified persecution, especially in fragile or repressive states where gender-based and religious violence are combined.
14. The following global political shifts are undermining both FoRB and WPS goals:
 - Authoritarian regimes are increasingly curtailing the rights of religious minorities, particularly women, who are often seen as cultural and ideological threats.
 - Religious and identity politics are rising, with women from minority faiths bearing the brunt of ideological violence, in countries such as India, Myanmar, and Iran.
 - There is a growing climate of impunity for gender-based and religious-based violence, particularly in states with weak rule of law or active conflict, meaning that perpetrators are rarely held accountable and survivors rarely supported.

Current Gaps Undermining Sustainability

15. Despite the UK's leadership, several gaps risk undermining the long-term success of its WPS commitments, including:
 - a. A disconnect between WPS and FoRB policy areas, despite their clear overlap in practice (see above).
 - b. Insufficient funding mechanisms for faith-based or faith-literate women-led organisations, especially in high-risk countries where Christian women suffer high levels of persecution or discrimination for their faith.
 - c. Limited space for persecuted religious minority women to participate in peacebuilding or policy processes due to state restrictions, community stigma, or security risks.

If the UK does not take steps to recognise and respond to these blind spots, its WPS programming will fail to protect those women most at risk.

Recommendations:

16. We recommend that the UK Government:

- a. Align WPS and FoRB Frameworks ensuring that future National Action Plans on WPS explicitly reference religious identity as a vulnerability factor.
- b. Build cross-departmental collaboration between the FoRB team, Gender Equality Unit, and WPS policy leads at the FCDO.
- c. Expand Safe Participation Channels: enable safe, remote, and confidential participation mechanisms so that Christian women in repressive states can inform UK WPS policy and programming through trusted intermediaries.
- d. Fund qualitative research and survivor-led assessments to capture the lived experiences of women persecuted for both gender and faith.
- e. Ensure that aid directed to state actors or institutions includes explicit protections for religious and gender minorities, especially in countries where violations are state-sanctioned or ignored.
- f. Conduct regular reviews to assess whether UK aid is reaching Christian women and other marginalised religious groups in fragile and conflict-affected states.

ⁱ <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/gender-persecution/2024-gender-report.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-women-peace-and-security-national-action-plan-2023-to-2027/uk-women-peace-and-security-national-action-plan-2023-to-2027>

^{iv} https://chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://opendoors.fi/wp-content/uploads/materiaalia/Gender-Specific_Religious_Persecution_Report_2024.pdf

^v <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/international-ministerial-conference-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-london-2022/about>