

# “TELL MY MOTHER I MISS HER”



JULY 2012

The Disappearance, Forced  
Conversions and Forced Marriages  
of Coptic Christian Women in  
Egypt (II)

Michele Clark and Nadia Ghaly



A Report Commissioned by

**Christian Solidarity International**

Könizstrasse 176, CH-3097 Liebefeld

[www.csi-suisse.ch](http://www.csi-suisse.ch) | [info@csi-suisse.ch](mailto:info@csi-suisse.ch)

Photo Note: The picture on the front cover is taken of the wrist of a young woman who returned from a forced conversion and forced marriage to a Muslim man. Her Coptic cross tattoo was forcibly removed at her conversion. The scars are visible near the new tattoo she received upon her escape. Such mutilation is common among forced converts. Occasionally, the tattoo is removed surgically; in other instances it is burned off with acid.

The title is a direct quote from a young Coptic woman. Her father recorded a telephone conversation in which he was able to talk to her after her abduction.

# “Tell My Mother I Miss Her”

## THE DISAPPEARANCE, FORCED CONVERSIONS AND FORCED MARRIAGES OF COPTIC CHRISTIAN WOMEN IN EGYPT (II)

### INTRODUCTION

By Dr. John Eibner

In November 2009, Christian Solidarity International (CSI) and the Coptic Foundation for Human Rights (CFHR) published a pioneering report entitled *The Disappearance, Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages of Coptic Christian Women in Egypt*, co-authored by anti-trafficking expert Michele Clark and Coptic human rights activist Nadia Ghaly.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of the report was to stimulate action-oriented discussion within the international human rights community, especially within major anti-trafficking and religious liberty institutions, where the issue had hitherto been a taboo, touching, as it does, a raw religio-political nerve in both the Islamic world and the West.

News of disappearances and forced marriages and conversions began to reach the West in the 1970s. At that time, Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat had unleashed forces of Islamism in the hope of strengthening the social and cultural foundations of the Egyptian state, following the failure of the socialist Pan-Arab ideology of his predecessor, Gamal Abdel Nasser. In 1976, two years before Sadat ordered his arrest and internal exile, the head of the Coptic Orthodox Church, the late Pope Shenouda III, is reported to have protested against the abuse of Christian females: “There is pressure being practiced to convert Coptic girls to Islam and marry them under terror to Muslim husbands.”<sup>2</sup> On March 16, 2004, the Coptic Pope again addressed this issue, indicating that he had received “countless” letters of complaint, and urged the police to investigate cases.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Michele Clark & Nadia Ghaly, *The Disappearance, Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages of Coptic Christian Women in Egypt*, Christian Solidarity International and Coptic Foundation for Human Rights, November 1999. [http://www.csi-int.org/pdfs/csi\\_coptic\\_report.pdf](http://www.csi-int.org/pdfs/csi_coptic_report.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Mary Abdelmassih, “Family of Abducted Christian Coptic Teenager Assaulted by Muslim Mob,” *AINA*, Cairo, June 9, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> “Coptic Pope Denounces Forced Conversion of Coptic Girls,” US Copts Association, March 25, 2004, <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/OrthodoxNews/message/671>. Cornelius Hulsman, “Blowing Up Rumors on Forced Conversions of Coptic Girls,” Arab-West Report, July 26, 2008, [www.arabwestreport.info/year-2004/week-12/17-blowing-rumors-forced-conversions-coptic-girls](http://www.arabwestreport.info/year-2004/week-12/17-blowing-rumors-forced-conversions-coptic-girls).

In 1999, a Freedom House report on religious liberty in Egypt, based largely on a fact-finding mission, stated:

There are credible reports from many areas of Egypt that militant Muslims kidnap or manipulate Christian girls into converting. This can even involve girls below the legal age in Egyptian law at which a person can change his or her religion.<sup>4</sup>

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a dramatic increase in cases reaching Egyptian lawyers and Coptic human rights organizations.

The 2009 Clark and Ghaly report made an impact. The U.S. Department of State’s Trafficking in Persons Report 2010 acknowledged such cases for the first time, stating:

During the reporting period, an international NGO released a report about alleged forced marriages of Coptic females in Egypt, including an allegation of forced prostitution, though the allegations have not been confirmed.<sup>5</sup>

The Department of State’s International Religious Freedom Report also spoke to the issue in 2010, 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.<sup>6</sup>

The State Department’s assertion that cases remain unverified, without providing evidence of an attempt to verify, appeared to be calculated to put a particularly sensitive political issue to rest, without regard for the well-being of the female victims. Therefore, CSI commissioned Ms. Clark and Ms. Ghaly to undertake a second fact-finding visit to Egypt in November 2011.

All the cases in their new report, entitled *Tell My Mother I Miss Her*, are based on interviews conducted by the co-authors with victims, family members, church workers and attorneys. All the cases have been reported to Egyptian authorities. Most are ongoing cases in the Egyptian courts and, as such, all evidence a matter of

---

<sup>4</sup> *Egypt’s Endangered Christians*, A Report by the Center for Religious Freedom of Freedom House, 1999, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State, Trafficking in Persons Report 2010, “Egypt.”  
<http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2010/142759.htm>

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Report 2010, “Egypt”, p. 26,  
<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/171733.pdf>.

record. Each case is documented and authentic. However, in order to protect the identity of victims and their families, all identifying information has been removed, given that this report is intended for broad dissemination.

*Tell My Mother I Miss Her* should be read in conjunction with the co-authors’ 2009 report.

CSI’s aim in publishing their latest finding remains constant. It is to

challenge human rights activists and institutions, especially those whose mandate includes women’s rights and trafficking in persons, to undertake, as a matter of urgency, further research into this form of gender and religious based violence against Coptic women and girls in Egypt.<sup>7</sup>

The events of the so-called “Arab Spring” swept Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak out of power, but they have scarcely begun to address the deep-seated Muslim and male supremacism that permeates large swathes of Egyptian society and provides the cultural context of the forcible marriages and conversions. This twin-headed cultural hydra of contempt for women and for non-Muslims was on display during demonstrations at Tahrir Square when the western journalists Laura Logan (ABC News) and Caroline Sinz (France 3) were brutally sexually assaulted by mobs of men. In the case of Ms. Logan, the assailants accused her - incorrectly - of being a Jew.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that Ms. Logan is American and Ms. Sinz is French guaranteed major media coverage and international condemnation. But Egyptian female victims, especially non-Muslims, do not command such media attention, nor the sympathies of western policy-makers. The sexual abuse and servitude of non-Muslim women in Egypt tends to elicit ritual denials and obfuscations that are reminiscent of the customary public reaction to such abuse of non-white women in America during the days of racial segregation.

In his historic message to the Muslim world, delivered from Cairo in June 2009, President Barack Obama stated:

I am convinced that in order to move forward, we must say openly things we hold in our hearts, and that too often are said only behind closed doors.<sup>9</sup>

CSI intends to continue researching this issue and to speak openly about it. We will also continue to encourage governmental and non-government human rights institutions to do likewise, with or without

---

<sup>7</sup> Clark & Ghaly, p. 1. [http://www.csi-int.org/pdfs/csi\\_coptic\\_report.pdf](http://www.csi-int.org/pdfs/csi_coptic_report.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> “Lara Logan Breaks Silence on Cairo Assault,” *CBS 60 Minutes*, April 28, 2011, [http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-18560\\_162-20058368.html?pageNum=2&tag=contentMain;contentBody](http://www.cbsnews.com/2100-18560_162-20058368.html?pageNum=2&tag=contentMain;contentBody).

“Journalists Sexually Assaulted Covering Egypt Unrest,” *AFP*, November 24, 2011.

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5h9r5Rf6FcTkoaMQrBv-QN86b42Wg>.

<sup>9</sup> “Remarks by the President on a New Beginning,” Cairo, June 4, 2009. [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/).

legitimization from governmental institutions. Denial and obfuscation will neither help victimized Christian women, nor challenge the religious bigotry and sexism that impedes the development of democracy in Egypt.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Eibner". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

Dr. John Eibner

Christian Solidarity International

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Coptic women in Egypt are disappearing from their homes, their schools, and their places of work. 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 forced conversion to Islam. Their lives, and the lives of their families, are severely damaged.

The Egyptian government and the international community have distanced themselves from any sense of urgency or malfeasance. Detractors claim that disappearances are nothing more than petulant acts of young women seeking to leave oppressive home environments and that there is no criminal activity involved. Claims of abductions, the detractors insist, are rather intended to deflect attention from the real causes of a young woman’s behavior, stemming from feeling trapped in an extremely conservative religious and social tradition, or desiring a life with more material benefits as well as educational and personal opportunities.

To address this issue, Christian Solidarity International and the Coptic Foundation for Human Rights commissioned a report written in November 2009 entitled “The Disappearance, Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages of Coptic Christian Women in Egypt.” The report conclusively stated that Coptic girls and women are deceptively lured into forced marriages with Muslim men and conversions to Islam; that the criminality of such activities is generally dismissed by the Egyptian authorities; that young women are presumed to be willing participants in such marriages and conversions; that the disappearances follow consistent patterns; that counseling sessions with members of their own clergy were no longer available to potential converts to Islam; that the Egyptian government does not restore the Christian identity of Coptic women who have returned to their communities of origin; that Coptic women are particularly vulnerable to deception and fraudulent practices; and that, while the Coptic Church does provide safe houses and shelters for some women, it is difficult for many to return to normal lives.

Since the publication of the first report, the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor has devoted more attention to the phenomenon, but without confirming it as human trafficking. Meanwhile, the Coptic community has become more vulnerable to persecution on account of the upsurge of 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 often thrives during times of political unrest and internal chaos, where traditional law enforcement measures, however insufficient, are usually overtaxed and limited in scope. Lawyers, social workers and civil society activists report that they are seeing more disappearances. Four attorneys collectively report a total of over 550 cases for the restoration of Christian identity following disappearances, forced marriages and forced conversions over a five-year period, with cases escalating since January 25, 2011. Furthermore, one attorney interviewed for this report indicates first-hand knowledge of over 1,600 cases of Christians who had converted to Islam in recent years, and who are now petitioning to have their Christian identities restored. Of this number, 60% are women.

Claims that all disappearances are the result of petulant behavior and not abduction reflect a misunderstanding of the relationships between the young women and their captors rather than an accurate analysis of the circumstances. This challenge has been repeatedly addressed, and not always successfully, in anti-trafficking discourse.

The goal of this second report is straightforward: to challenge the notion that the testimony of victims is made up of mere allegations and to encourage the Government of Egypt and the international community to address the issue openly and responsibly.

The authors of this report recognize that not all disappearances result from abductions, that not all marriages are forced and some conversions can be consensual. The authors spoke with a young woman who quite candidly admitted that she left her husband because he beat her while her male Muslim neighbor was kind. She eventually returned to her family.

Notwithstanding the ambiguity of many situations, the authors maintain it is not possible to dismiss each documented case in the 2009 report on the grounds that girls willingly and without being misled left their families.

This new report substantiates and confirms the findings of the 2009 publication. In addition, the authors have observed changes in trends and patterns, all of which continue to reinforce the pre-meditation of the captors. Only verifiable cases are included in this report. Each of these cases is verifiable through attorney files, personal interviews and police reports. *The names of young women and their family members and other identifying details are not published in this report in order to protect their identities.*

**The key findings of the 2012 Report are:**

- The numbers of disappearances and abductions are increasing.
- Fewer girls are returning to their families.
- Social media is increasingly used to communicate a victim’s status.
- Minors and mothers of young children are increasingly targeted.
- Abductions continue to be organized and planned.
- Captors target women and girls when they are unprotected and vulnerable.
- Captors sever ties between victims and their families.
- Captors make use of measures involving force, fraud and coercion.

This report builds on the recommendations of the earlier publication in seeking to guarantee the protection of minors, secure the cooperation of law enforcement in investigating and prosecuting reports of abductions and disappearances, and expedite reconversions to Christianity in instances of abductions.



In conclusion, the authors of this report believe that it is no longer possible to refer to cases such as those described in this report as allegations. The Egyptian government, and the international community, must recognize them for what they are: criminal cases.

## THE DISAPPEARANCE OF COPTIC WOMEN IN EGYPT

For over thirty years, reports of Coptic women being kidnapped, forcibly converted and married to Muslim men have been emerging from Egypt. What began as an issue supported by anecdotal evidence and kept alive by concerned family members, clergy and a few brave human rights attorneys and activists has not abated. Instead, it continues to surface, strengthened by growing numbers of verifiable cases. The disappearances, forced marriages and conversions of young Coptic women are now addressed by western governments and some media outlets. On October 27, 2011 the European Parliament issued a statement condemning the violence directed against the Copts in Egypt, and in particular, expressing concern “about the kidnapping of Coptic girls who have been forced to convert to Islam.”<sup>1</sup> On December 15, 2010, the BBC aired a documentary entitled “Christian minority under pressure in Egypt.”<sup>2</sup> In the opening scene, a father relates to the interviewer that there will be no Christmas tree in their home this year; their daughter, who loved Christmas, was abducted and has never returned, and the presence of a tree would be too painful. On June 15, 2011, the US Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission) convened three experts (including one author of this report) to testify at a hearing on the status of Egypt’s Coptic Christians, with a focus on the abductions of young Coptic women.<sup>3</sup> And finally, Yasmin El Rashdi, writing in the *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.”<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, the climate is precarious for Egypt’s 10 million-plus Copts. During the uprising that led to the resignation of President Mubarak, some Copts and Muslims stood arm in arm in Tahrir Square in Cairo, united in their efforts to end dictatorship. Today, Mubarak is gone. But the Copts have not fared well by his departure. Indeed, they are facing increasing persecution. The recent massacre at Maspero, in Cairo, where Egyptian armed forces attacked Christians engaged in a peaceful demonstration, augurs little favor for the future of Egypt’s Coptic population. According to Nina Shea, international religious freedom expert:

“The real significance of this is that it signals the failure of the Christian Coptic Community by the State. The military was their last hope in protecting them from lawless forces in society that were religiously motivated to [eradicate] them, namely the Salafis. Now they know they have no protection. [Furthermore] I think we can expect to see a major exodus of

---

<sup>1</sup> European Parliament News. Accessed at <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/pressroom/content/20111027IPR30446/html/Parliament-stands-up-for-Christians-in-Egypt-and-Syria>

<sup>2</sup> The documentary can be seen at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12014779>

<sup>3</sup> Full Transcript of the hearing is available at: [http://csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewTranscript&ContentRecord\\_id=504&Content\\_Type=H,B&ContentRecord\\_Type=H&CFID=59942414&CFTOKEN=34987951](http://csce.gov/index.cfm?FuseAction=ContentRecords.ViewTranscript&ContentRecord_id=504&Content_Type=H,B&ContentRecord_Type=H&CFID=59942414&CFTOKEN=34987951)

<sup>4</sup> El Rashdi, Yasmin. *The Victorious Islamists*. New York Review of Books. June 15, 2011. Accessed at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2011/jul/14/egypt-victorious-islamists/?page=1>

Coptic Christians from Egypt. This is a watershed moment. The whole reason they were in the streets was to protest lawless forces. It extinguishes all hope for them. They are utterly vulnerable.”<sup>5</sup>

Almost as if on cue, two months later the Wall Street Journal reported that, since the events of January 2011, asylum applications into the US from Egyptian Copts have doubled.<sup>6</sup>

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, Michele Clark, one of the authors of this report, 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.<sup>7</sup>

## THE 2009 REPORT

“**The Disappearance, Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages of Coptic Christian Women in Egypt,**” published in November 2009 by Christian Solidarity International and the Coptic Foundation for Human Rights and written by Michele Clark and Nadia Ghaly, documented disappearances, forced conversions and marriages among Egypt’s Coptic minority. This report credibly positioned the plight of Coptic women as a challenge for the international community.

The report was based on first-person interviews with young women who had been held against their will by Muslim captors, forced to convert and marry their captors and who, in some cases, were able to return to their families. Other sources of information included conversations with parish priests, monks and nuns at a monastery that provides shelter to women returning from abduction, and human rights attorneys who represent many of these young women as they attempt to regain their Christian identities. Police reports, attorney files and church/clergy records support each case.

The main findings of the report were:

1. **Coptic women and girls are deceptively lured into forced marriages with Muslim men and conversions to Islam.** This conclusion was reached through personal interviews with young women who had returned from such situations, parish priests, the head of a monastery providing shelter to over 50 women, and an examination of court cases filed by human rights attorneys.

---

<sup>5</sup> Joan Frawley Desmond. “Watershed Moment: Copts Killed in Violence: Nina Shea predicts a 'major exodus' of Christians after deadly violence in Cairo.” *National Catholic Register*. October 10, 2011. Accessed at [http://www.ncregister.com/site/print\\_article/30767/](http://www.ncregister.com/site/print_article/30767/)

<sup>6</sup> “Egypt’s Embattled Christians See Room in America” by Lucette Lagnado. *The Wall Street Journal*. Saturday, December 24, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Conversation with Caroline Doss, January 12, 2012. Ms. Doss, together with Ms. Clark and Mr. Jean Maher, testified before a US Helsinki Commission Hearing: “Minority at Risk: Coptic Christians in Egypt” - July 22, 2011

2. **Egyptian authorities dismiss the criminality of such marriages and conversions.** Young women are presumed to be willing participants in the marriages and conversions. However, these arguments do not take into consideration the role of coercion in obtaining consent to marriage or conversion. Women testify to fraudulent claims, the use of force, threats and physical abuse, including rape and the forced removal of Coptic tattoos. There were no reported cases of prosecution among all reported cases. Islam allows a Muslim man to marry a Christian woman without a conversion, so there is no apparent religious need for these conversions.
3. **The disappearances of Coptic women and girls follow consistent patterns that include deception, fraud and force.** Testimonies from returning women as well as family members and attorneys indicate that means of enticement into a fraudulent relationship followed specific patterns and involved the use of women and men to build relationships of trust and dispel resistance.
4. **Religious counseling sessions with members of a person’s own clergy prior to conversion to Islam are no longer required.** Such sessions were halted by the government in 2008 and have not been reinstated.
5. **Coptic women face physical and psychological abuse before and after their forced conversions and marriages.** Abuse includes beatings, isolation from family members, and restrictions on personal freedom. Cases of ensnarement, rape and physical abuse are rarely filed in court.
6. **The Egyptian Government does not restore the religious identities of women who return to their communities and families.** As a consequence, these women are unable to marry within their own communities and in many instances remain marginalized.
7. **Coptic women and girls are vulnerable to deception and fraudulent practices because of difficult home environments, economic pressures and sheltered lives.**
8. **The Coptic Church has developed some safe houses for victimized women and girls.** These centers, usually established in monasteries, provide shelter and housing for young women returning from a forced marriage and conversion.

The Report also included recommendations for the Egyptian government, the Coptic Church and the international community. In particular, the report recommended that the Egyptian government

1. Reinstate counseling sessions for those contemplating conversion to Islam.
2. Expedite the restoration of Christian identity cards and legal Christian status to young women forcibly converted to Islam.
3. Investigate and prosecute all reports and allegations of disappearances, abductions, rape and other acts of violence against Coptic women.

## LEGAL UPDATE

In July 2011, Egypt’s Supreme Administrative Court ruled that Christian converts to Islam could reconvert and be identified as Christians on their national identity cards and birth certificates. However, lawyers representing many Copts, the largest population affected by this decision, argue that similar decisions in the past have not been implemented and remain skeptical as to the potential for any real change. In fact, restoration of Christian identity cards has remained the exception. Lawyers document a double standard regarding conversions in Egypt. When a Christian converts to Islam, documents are processed with

remarkable speed. In the case of conversions from Islam to Christianity, these lawyers report a process rife with red tape and obstructionism. This process also affects the children of Christian converts to Islam, who are automatically registered as Muslims when they reach the age of 16 regardless of whether or not their parents became reconverts to Christianity.<sup>8</sup>

## NEW CHALLENGES

Notwithstanding a growing body of evidence to substantiate allegations of deceptive and coercive practices regarding young Coptic women, the issue remains controversial, both in Egypt and abroad. Cases are normally publicized by the Coptic activists who most fervently reject the discriminatory conventions of dhimmitude,<sup>9</sup> and who dare to cross the red lines drawn by Egypt’s Islamic political and religious establishment. For these activists, the disappearance, forced marriage and forced conversion of Coptic women and girls is a tangible sign of the persecution to which Egypt’s Christian community is subjected. One of the most prominent Coptic campaigners on behalf of these female victims is the journalist and human rights activist Magdy Khalil of the Middle East Freedom Forum. According to Khalil:

Abducting and converting Coptic girls to Islam is not only a result of the paranoid and racist incitation against the Copts, but it is an organized and pre-planned process by associations and organizations inside Egypt with domestic and Arab funding as the main role in seducing and luring Coptic girls is carried through cunning, deceit and enticement or through force if required.

As for the role of the Egyptian state, Khalil explains:

The government does not meet to plan how to abduct Coptic girls, but it is a conniver and a collaborate partner that contributed in creating this environment. As for the actual planning, it is carried out by individuals, groups, associations, as well as Egyptian and regional organizations. What the government plans for and implements is the lateralization of the Copts within the Egyptian society.<sup>10</sup>

Since the overthrow of President Mubarak, Coptic activists and families of missing girls have taken advantage of the broader space given to civil society by forming the Association of Victims of Abduction and Enforced Disappearance. On the 29<sup>th</sup> of February, 2012, they staged a public demonstration before the

---

<sup>8</sup> “Court Allows Christian reconverts to state religion on ID cards.” By Heba Fahmy. *Daily News Egypt*. July 4, 2011. Accessed at <http://www.thedailynewsegypt.com/religion/court-allows-christian-reconverts-to-state-religion-on-id-cards-dp3.html>

<sup>9</sup> Dhimmitude is the collective condition of dhimmi communities. Dhimmis are Christians, Jews and certain other non-Muslims whose communities have accepted - usually under duress - Muslim political and social supremacy according to the norms established by discriminatory Shariah law. See Bat Ye’or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam*, Farleigh Dickenson University Press, 1985.

<sup>10</sup> “Who is responsible for abducting Coptic Girls?” Jihad Watch, August 26, 2005. <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2005/08/magdy-khalil-who-is-responsible-for-abducting-coptic-girls.html>.

Egyptian parliament, chanting: “Where is the rule of law?” “No for the Islamization of minors,” and “MPs, where are the rights of Copts?”<sup>11</sup>

The Copts whose reflexes remain strongly conditioned by the age-old violence and discrimination that are inherent in the conventions of dhimmitude are the most inclined to respect the rules laid down by Egypt’s Islamic authorities, and to downplay and depoliticize the plight of missing Coptic women and girls. Dr. Sherif Doss, a prominent physician and politician, is one Coptic leader who prefers not to highlight the issue. He explains that the victims are limited to young females who “are not educated and have not learned to make wise decisions in life.”<sup>12</sup> Other Copts emphasize that repressive home environments, arranged marriages and strict prohibitions against divorce drive young Christian women into romantic relationships with Muslim men, which appear to offer freedom from a troubled past.<sup>13</sup> These scenarios, they claim, imply consent and cast doubt on the use of force. Blaming the victim in rape and trafficking cases is a widespread cultural reflex in male-dominated societies where pinning blame on perpetrators runs the risk of serious consequences.

One of the most the most vocal proponents of a dhimmitude-conditioned response, Cornelis Hulsman, is not a native Egyptian, but is a Cairo-based Dutch sociologist and the publisher of *Arab-West Report*. He has established the Centers for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation and the Center for Arab-West Understanding, and through these instruments is active player in the foreign relations of the Egyptian state and church.<sup>14</sup> Hulsman’s Arab-West consortium has long campaigned against Copts who accuse Muslim men of using force to kidnap, marry and convert Coptic women and girls. “[Such] stories,” Hulsman wrote in 2007,

often reflect pre-existing deep anti-Muslim sentiments and reinforce such sentiments. Most stories of Muslims forcing Christian girls to convert to Islam fit this category. Such stories create a boomerang effect, angry responses from Muslims that could easily reflect on their relations with other Christians who had nothing to do with this type of reporting.<sup>15</sup>

Hulsman’s coverage is animated by a declared commitment to combat reports that “make the public believe Muslims target Christians, creating Christian self-pity and Muslim anger by using rumors, uninvestigated allegations, and [by] neglecting social, cultural and historical contexts.”<sup>16</sup> Arab-West Report claims to have “investigated around 200 of claims of forced conversion of Christian girls in Egypt and found not a single

---

<sup>11</sup> Mohamed Abdel Salam & Joseph Mayton, “Egypt’s Copts protest ‘disappearance’ of girls”, *Bikya Masr*, February 29, 2012, <http://bikyamasr.com/59521/egypts-copts-protest-disappearance-of-girls/>

<sup>12</sup> Personal interviews with the authors. Cairo, Egypt. November 18, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph Mayton, “Missing Coptic Women May Send Distress Signals.” *WeNews*, February 1, 2007.

<http://www.womensenews.org/story/the-world/070201/missing-coptic-women-may-send-distress-signals>.

<sup>14</sup> According to Hulsman, his Center for Arab-West Understanding obtained legal recognition as a Non-Governmental Organization through the backing of powerful representatives of the Mubarak regime, among them: the late Grand Sheikh of Al Ahzar Muhammad Sayyed Tantawi, Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Minister of Islamic Endowments, Mahmud Hamdi Zaquq, and Arab League Secretary-General Amir Musa. [http://www.cawu.org/?About\\_Us](http://www.cawu.org/?About_Us)

<sup>15</sup> Cornelis Hulsman & Sawsan Gabra Ayoub Khalil, “To Be an Effective Advocate for Peace, Media Distortions Must Be Addressed,” *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, no. 8, June 2007, p. 81. [http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/quaderns/8/q8\\_081.pdf](http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/quaderns/8/q8_081.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> Cornelis Hulsman & Sawsan Gabra Ayoub Khalil, “To Be an Effective Advocate for Peace, Media Distortions Must Be Addressed,” *Quaderns de la Mediterrània*, no. 8, June 2007, p. 81. [http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/quaderns/8/q8\\_081.pdf](http://www.iemed.org/publicacions/quaderns/8/q8_081.pdf)

one of them to involve kidnap, i.e. the use of physical force to get young Coptic girls to convert to Islam.”<sup>17</sup> But details of only seven cases are provided in what Hulsman calls his “most comprehensive” report on the issue.<sup>18</sup>

The responses conditioned by dhimmitude strike a chord with the Western powers. Since 1995, the European Union has been pursuing the convergence of Islamic North Africa and the Middle East with post-Christian, secular Europe through the Barcelona Process.<sup>19</sup> Meanwhile, following 9/11, President George W. Bush, established winning the hearts and minds of Muslims as a major American foreign policy objective.<sup>20</sup> In this context, the US Department of State, fearing the anger of Muslim military allies, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, downplays and depoliticizes the issue, as Hulsman does.

The US Department of State’s 2010 Trafficking in Persons Report referenced the 2009 CSI report, claiming, “During the reporting period, an international NGO released a report about alleged forced marriages of Coptic Christian females in Egypt, including an allegation of forced prostitution, though the allegations have not been confirmed.”<sup>21</sup>

The US Department of State’s International Religious Freedom Report for 2010 also referenced this same report:

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.<sup>22</sup>

The authors of the 2009 report recognize that not all disappearances result from abductions, that not all marriages are forced and that some conversions can be consensual. The authors spoke with a young woman who quite candidly admitted that she left her husband because he beat her while her male Muslim neighbor was kind. She eventually returned to her family.

---

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.arabwestreport.info/8-christian-solidarity-international-claiming-forced-conversion-coptic-girls-islam>

<sup>18</sup> “Forced Conversions or not?” New York Council of Churches, June 28, 1999 (RNSAW 1999, 26A, art. 37), the report “Conversions of Christians to Islam,” by Dr. Rodolph Yanney, January 9, 2001 (RNSAW 2001, 01A, art. 4) and the “Open letter to former US Congressman Pastor Ed McNeely” (AWR 2003, 30, art. 34). Also see AWR 2004, 28, arts. 21-22, 37-38, and AWR 2004, 36, art. 28 for the case of Injī Edward Nājī.

<sup>19</sup> “The Barcelona Process”, European Union External Action. [http://ec.europa.eu/euromed/barcelona\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/euromed/barcelona_en.htm)

<sup>20</sup> “Winning the hearts and minds’ of Arab and Muslim populations has quite understandably risen to the top of the Bush administration’s agenda.” David Hoffman, “Beyond Public Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2002, pp. 83-95. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/57813/david-hoffman/beyond-public-diplomacy>.

<sup>21</sup> Accessed at <http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2010/142759.htm>

<sup>22</sup> Accessed at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148817.htm>

However, **it is not possible to dismiss each documented case in the 2009 report on these grounds.** Over the past six years, the authors have observed remarkable consistency in the stories of young women and their families from different parts of the country and from different social backgrounds, a consistency that supports the reliability of their testimonies. Respected and well-known human rights attorneys represent the majority of women whose stories are told in these reports. They have court documents and sworn affidavits attesting to the veracity of their clients.

Claims that all disappearances are the result of petulant behavior and not abduction reflect a misunderstanding of the relationships between the young women and their captors rather than an accurate analysis of the circumstances. This challenge has been repeatedly addressed, and not always successfully, in anti-trafficking discourse.

In critiquing the 2009 report, the International Religious Freedom Report claims that it is “difficult to determine whether compulsion was used, as most cases involved a female Copt who converted to Islam when she married a male Muslim.” This statement assumes that all marriages are voluntary and denies a recognized human rights violation, which is that marriages can be forced and that force obviates consent. A recent European Union Policy Directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims states in paragraph (11) of its introduction:

The definition [of trafficking in human beings] also covers...other behaviour such as illegal adoption or forced marriage in so far as they fulfill the constitutive elements of trafficking in human beings.<sup>23</sup>

Given that the authors of this report have verified that force, fraud and coercion are present in our documented cases, the fact that such trafficking cases are linked to marriage does not obviate the offense, as claimed by the US Department of State above.

This report will focus upon various forms of vulnerability and coercion and their relevance in these instances in order to make a clear case for the reality of the abuse and exploitation of Egyptian Coptic women.

## **A NEW REPORT**

In November 2011, Ms. Ghaly and Ms. Clark traveled to Egypt in order to gather information for a second report. The purpose of this new study is to acquire further evidence to support the claims of disappearances, abductions and forced conversions and forced marriages of Coptic women in Egypt and to challenge the use of the term “allegation” in US Government reports.

---

<sup>23</sup> The European Union Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2011 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA



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, by the authors of this report.

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.*

## **AN INCREASING CHALLENGE**

This report corroborates all the findings and conclusions of the 2009 report. Additionally, the report provides insight into new aspects of the disappearances, abductions, and forced marriages and conversions of Coptic women and girls.

### **The number of disappearances and abductions appear to be increasing.**

As in the anti-trafficking arena, 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.

J. was 18 years old when she was abducted on her way home from school. Her abductor was a man who had worked for her father and had begun to make advances towards her.

According to a police report, the man is an escapee from prison, and had threatened J. ten days prior to the actual abduction. The threat was reported to the police on May 20. Two days later, she was drugged, raped and taken to Alexandria where she and her abductor were

married. She was returned to her family on June 1. Legally, she is still married to a Muslim man and her identity card indicates that she is a Muslim. (Case 10)

The issue of the disappearance of Coptic women is coming out from the shadows as evidenced by the emergence of websites managed by Coptic activists documenting claims of disappearances and abductions. Increasingly, families learn about the status of a missing wife or daughter via websites which announce new conversions to Islam.

### **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.

George is a quiet, soft-spoken man. His daughter, H., disappeared on August 28, 2011. “I received a phone call telling me to watch out for my daughter,” he told us. He took his phone to the local police to report the threat but the police did nothing. He tried repeatedly to call back the number, sending numerous text messages as well.

After that, he kept H. at home all day. For almost two weeks, he remained at home, until finally he had to return to work. When he came back home, his daughter was gone. She had wanted to go to the supermarket, 250 meters from their home, and her mother had let her.

George looked everywhere for his daughter. He reported the disappearance to the police, who sent him from one station to the other before he was able to file a report. Although he was able to find out the name of the owner of the cell phone on which he received the phone call, he reports that the police did nothing. He has not heard a word from his daughter since her disappearance.

When asked, George replied that he has learned of at least four similar cases of daughters who have gone missing without any further communication to their families in his own neighborhood. These cases have never been registered with the police. Nor has George sought the help of a lawyer. (Case 1)

It is not only the local police who are reluctant to take these cases seriously. In September of 2011, human rights attorney Stefanos Milad Stefanos took fourteen open cases of abduction to the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior to request investigations. He reports that there has been no follow-up to his report. The authors of this report met with one father whose case was taken to the Attorney General.

D. was 19 when she disappeared on May 20, 2011. She went to work as a computer technician and never came home. Her mother reported her missing at 6:00 PM that evening. At 11:00 PM, the police came to their home and told the family that she had married a Muslim man. The family reluctantly accepted the fact that their daughter had gone of her own accord.

D. called her father, an army officer, on June 20. As soon as the father realized that it was his daughter, he pushed the “Record” button on his cell phone. Through sobs, his daughter apologizes to her father and asks him to tell her mother that she misses her. Her cries are interrupted by the sounds of someone entering the room. The line goes dead. When K, the father, calls back, a man answers the phone and says, “*She is unconscious now but let me tell you something, this girl is more important to me than anything else. I swear to God, if something happens to her, I will kill all of you and I will burn the church. You know that I can do that!*”<sup>24</sup>

In this case, Stefanos presented the Attorney General with three requests: The first, to address the threats to the father and the church; the second, to allow the father to meet with his daughter; and finally, to allow his daughter to tell the story of what had happened to her. If she in fact did marry her husband according to her own free will, there would be no more charges.

D. has called her father now eight times, asking for help in getting away. She says that she is abused and mistreated. She is imprisoned in a room and occasionally has access to a phone. Her father knows where she is, but is afraid to intervene because the consequences might be worse. Out of desperation, he told his daughter to cut herself so that her family would take her to the hospital. There, he might get a chance to see her. Unfortunately for him, the family had the doctor brought to the house in order to treat D.

At the time of our meetings, there had been no response from the office of the Attorney General to any of the cases brought by Mr. Stefanos. (Case 3)

Finally, it is important to note that in Egypt, the problem of violence against women in general and the lack of reliable information on such offenses is a documented challenge. The UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, for example, “regrets the lack of data and information on the incidence of various forms of violence against women and girls [in Egypt], as well as the lack of studies and surveys on

---

<sup>24</sup> Partial Transcription from recorded telephone conversation between D.’s father and abductor.

the extent of violence and its root causes.”<sup>25</sup> In a climate hostile to the reporting of crimes related to sexual assault and domestic violence, members of minority groups are hesitant to come forward.

### **Fewer girls appear to be returning to their families**

Our 2009 report focused on young women who had returned from a forced marriage and conversion and were struggling to regain their Christian identities. 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.

A growing number of grief-stricken parents now report that, following the disappearance of a daughter, there is neither contact from her captor nor any communication from the daughter herself.

Z. owns his own business in Cairo. He works hard, and his family is well-off. His wife passed away several years ago and his daughter, A., took care of the family. On April 8, 2011, she went to her private tutoring lessons and never returned home. Z. received a call from a Muslim girl who told him that A. was not feeling well and would not be coming home right away. At that time, A. was 17 years old.

When she failed to show up for dinner, the father brought together a group of friends and together they began to search for A. After three days, he filed a police report. The police were able to follow the movements of A.’s captors by tracking her cell phone, which was used with a different SIM card belonging to a recognized drug dealer. However, even in possession of this information, the police have done nothing to locate this man, notwithstanding the fact that he has a firm link to a disappeared girl. Concurrently, the father ran multiple missing persons ads in local papers.

The family has heard nothing from A. since her disappearance and there is no trace of her on any of the traditional conversion websites. (Case 12)

---

S. was 23 years old when she disappeared on February 4, 2011. She comes from a family with modest means and worked in a plastics factory. She was living at home. On February 4, she went to evening church services with her mother. When her mother came out of the church, S. had disappeared. A young child told her that a microbus full of young girls took her daughter.

---

<sup>25</sup> Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Egypt. CEDAW/C/EGY/C0/7. Forty-fifth session. 5 February 2010. Paragraph (23)

The family searched throughout the entire neighborhood and in other towns for their daughter, putting up posters in public places. S.’s father tried to report the abduction on February 7 but was told to go to several police stations before one would file a report. Since February, there has been no communication with the family. S.’s brother is despondent. He says that he has three choices: to find his sister, to kill himself, or to hope that death finds him quickly. (Case 6)

## **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.

Fayqa is tired. She has been looking for her daughter since June of 2010. At that time, her daughter, N., 38, was on her way to Cairo with her children to care for her when she came home from the hospital. N. called from home one evening announcing her arrival time. This was the last time the mother spoke to her daughter.

Fayqa learned that N. had been befriended by a Muslim woman, a neighbor, who also disappeared the same day. She has not been seen since. A woman of some independent means, Fayqa has spent considerable personal resources trying to locate her daughter but has found nothing. Fayqa eventually received a call from a Muslim man giving her a phone number. When she called, another man answered and told her, “I have your daughter. She is with me, and under my care. You will never see her again.”

Finally, Fayqa saw a photo of N. on a website for newly converted Muslims, and found a YouTube clip in which N. and her daughter were both announcing their conversions to Islam. Fayqa was puzzled. Her daughter had never used any form of social media in the past. The action was out of character. N.’s daughter, M., is now married to a Muslim student who had been visiting her at the university. (Case 11)

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

In addition to disappearances of single young women over the age of 18, there is a noted increase in the disappearance of minors and of mothers with young children.

Lawyers report an increase in the abductions of mothers with children. While the age of consent to convert 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.

Not all victims come from modest or poor families. H. was married to a wealthy Coptic businessman and had three children who attended a private school. She hired a private car to take them to and from school every morning, accompanying them in the morning and waiting for them in the afternoon, spending her time talking with other young mothers. One, who was subsequently revealed to be the aunt of the driver of the car she hired, was especially engaging and they began buying drinks for each other (bottles of juice or other soft drinks). One morning, after dropping her child off to school, she noted that the driver was going a different direction. She was drinking a bottle of juice, and felt uncomfortable. The driver took her to Al Azhar Mosque. There, she was issued a document claiming that she was a single woman and that she had converted to Islam. Furthermore, the document claimed that her children would automatically become Muslims. Her name was changed. She was persuaded to sign papers divorcing her husband. In her drugged state, she did not have the presence of mind to resist. Eventually she was able to escape and seek refuge with her cousin.

H. is now living with her cousin, whose family is subject to threats as a result of her presence in their household. Her husband will not allow her to see her children and they remain hidden; the father protects them because he fears that they will be taken away and sent to an Islamic center since they are legally considered to be Muslims. She feels trapped: She cannot see her children, her marriage is ended, and she continues to have a Muslim ID card. Detractors claim that she was having an affair with her driver and that the situation escalated beyond her control. Asked about this charge, she looks up at the interviewers and with contempt in her voice claims, “I had a wonderful life. If I was going to risk losing my marriage, it would not have been with a cab driver.” (Case 5)

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF DISAPPEARANCES**

### **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 benefitted materially; frequently, family members were provided with new apartments or furniture, and unemployable young men were given jobs.

H., the wife of a wealthy Coptic businessman, dropped her children off at school every morning and waited for them in the afternoon. She became friends with a Muslim woman and they developed a habit of treating each other to cool soft drinks. One day H. was given juice that contained a sedative of some sort. She was then abducted. (Case 5)

J. was drugged by a man who worked for her father and with whom she had become friendly. (Case 10)

A. was married to an abusive husband. Y., a Muslim farmer and neighbor, offered to help her. (Case 4)

M.’s mother was abducted. Some time later, M., a university student, was befriended by a Muslim student. Gradually she dropped all contact with her friends and extended family. They are now married. (Case 11)

In some instances, parents or relatives receive warning that something is about to happen.

George received a call on his telephone. The caller spoke only a few words: “Take care of your daughter.” (Case 1)

**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.<sup>26</sup>

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.

A counselor in a family center describes how the young women are vulnerable because they come from very closed communities. Young women want something more, including an education and a career, and they are vulnerable to offers of excitement and romance. What they do not realize is that the offers they are presented with are all a fraud.

“One young woman sold her religion for a glass of sugar cane juice,” says a social worker. It was not so much for the juice, which she could get anywhere. It was for the kindness, which she never experienced.

---

<sup>26</sup> Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women: Egypt. CEDAW/C/EGY/C0/7. Forty-fifth session. 5 February 2010. Paragraph (45)

Says a lawyer: “The abductors read people. They look for girls who are vulnerable. In many cases, the abductors are neighbors or family friends. They know the habits and the vulnerabilities of the family. And once they figure these out, they make their move.” He goes on to say that if the issues are family hardships, inducement usually comes in the form of material support (or the promise of support). If the family issues are emotional, the abductors promise romance.

A grieving father told us, “My daughter was illiterate. She knows nothing except home, family and church.” (Case 6)

But not all girls are from economically depressed family situations. In some cases, Coptic women are abducted from wealthy families, or families of means. Ransoms are not requested, indicating that the abductions are not driven by economic gain. Rather, these women disappear or are abducted when they are away from their homes, in transit from home to work, or traveling to different areas.

**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, Attorney Stefanos claims that conversion is the ultimate goal of the captivity.

George and his wife have not heard from their daughter since August 2011. (Case 1)

S. disappeared on February 4, 2011. The family has not heard from her. (Case 6)

M. left home on December 23, 2011; no one has heard from her since. (Case 21)

N. disappeared on June 30, 2010. The only signs of life the mother had were through a YouTube video in which N. and her daughter M. announced their conversion to Islam. (Case 11)

N. did not return from a tutoring session on August 9, 2010. The only communication the parents have received was through a YouTube video documenting N.’s conversion to Islam. (Case 13)



## **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 shares drinks 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.”

## **APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY OF CASES**

### **Case 1:**

Date of disappearance: August 28, 2011

Victim: 17-year-old girl

Source of information: Personal interview with victim’s father, copies of missing persons ads in newspapers, police report references.

Current Status: There has been no news of the daughter.

Summary: On August 11, Victim’s father received a threatening call from a private phone. The caller spoke the following words: “Take care of your daughter.”

The number appeared on his screen. He tried to call back and send texts but received no answer. He reported the threats to the police but received no response. For almost two weeks, the father stayed at home to take care of his daughter, but finally he had to go to work. He was gone for a few hours and when he returned, his daughter was gone. She had asked her mother for permission to go to the supermarket, 250 meters from her house. She had been gone 15 minutes. She was bored and she complained about being locked up. Her father went after her but could not find her.

He looked everywhere and could find no signs of her. He reported the disappearance to the police, who sent him from one station to the other. He was finally able to file a report. His complaint was not taken seriously. He asked that the phone number be tracked; it was sent to the investigation department and he was told that this could take three weeks. He conducted his own research and was able to get a name but the police did nothing to follow up.

The parents have heard nothing from their daughter since her disappearance. Since that time, the father learned of 4 similar cases of unexplained and unreported disappearances of daughters in his neighborhood. He placed missing persons ads in the newspapers but received no response. The mother remains distraught and the father writes anguished poems about his daughter.

### **Case 2:**

Date of disappearance: September 10, 2010

Subject: 26-year-old married woman

Source of information: Personal interview

Current status: Woman has since returned to her Coptic husband

Summary: A 26-year-old married woman had problems with her husband. She was married at the age of 16. Her husband beat her. He was unemployed and she worked to support the family. She worked in a telephone company and was befriended by a Muslim male colleague. She confided in him about her bad marriage. Their relationship became a friendship. When the woman’s husband found out, he beat her in the street; her Muslim friend came to her rescue and took her away to a safe place. Her uncle found out and forced her to go to a monastery but she ran away

instead and went back to the Muslim man. She stayed with him and converted to Islam; they were married and she became pregnant. Eventually, because of her two older children she returned to her husband and had him declared the legal father of her daughter. She did not feel as if the Muslim man had done anything wrong.

**Case 3:**

Date of disappearance: May 20, 2011

Subject: 19-year-old single woman living at home

Source of information: Personal interview with victim’s father and family attorney; recorded telephone conversations; police reports.

Current status: Although the father has been able to speak to his daughter by telephone, the family has not been able to see her since her disappearance.

Summary: Victim is a 19-year old girl who had finished her training as a computer technician. She did not return home from work. Her mother reported her absence to the police at 6 PM; there was no formal accusation. At 11 PM the police came to the home and told the family that the Victim had married a Muslim man. The mother had a stroke and the rest of the family thought she had gone willingly with her new husband for up to 3 weeks after the incident.

On June 20, the victim was moved from Cairo to another city and called her father. The father recorded this initial conversation, which is abruptly interrupted by the sound of a man entering the room. In a subsequent call, the man says, “She is unconscious now but let me tell you something: this girl is more important to me than anything else. I swear to God if something happens to her, I will kill all of you and I will burn the church, and you know that I can do that.”

The victim’s lawyer took the case to the Attorney General and requested three things: 1) address the threats to the father and the church in the recorded message, 2) allow the father to meet with his daughter, and 3) respect the wishes of the daughter regarding her religious identity. To date, the lawyer has received no response.

Victim has called her father now 8 times, asking for some kind of help. She speaks to him of abuse and mistreatment. She is with Muslims and reports that she is beaten when she makes the sign of the cross. She is imprisoned in a room, and occasionally has access to a phone. The father knows where she is but is afraid that if he tries to intervene the consequences will be worse. His position in the army does not help. Out of desperation, the father told her to cut herself so that the family would take her to the hospital. There, he might get a chance to see her. Unfortunately for him, the family asked the doctor to come to the house.

**Case 4:**

Date of disappearance: September 15, 2010

Victim: Young married woman with 3-year-old daughter.

Source of information: Interview with victim’s lawyer.

Current status: Victim has remained with her Muslim husband and converted to Islam.

Summary: The victim was married with a three-year old daughter; her husband was abusive. A young Muslim farmer offered to help her; he was already married. The first wife contacted the victim’s family out of jealousy and the family placed the young woman in a monastery where she stayed for 10 days. She was able to contact her Muslim husband,

who reported what had happened to the imam. The imam sent a delegation to rescue her. A gun was fired into the air. A rumor spread that a Christian killed a Muslim and the church was burned. In all, 11 people died: 5 Muslims and 6 Christians. 57 were injured. The subject and her Muslim husband were arrested and accused of causing a riot. She was released two weeks later. Her conversion was announced via YouTube.

**Case 5:**

Date of disappearance: April 6, 2011

Victim: 31-year-old married woman with two children

Source of Information: Interview with victim’s attorney; interview with victim and members of her family.

Current status: Victim lives with her relatives. She is not able to see her children, who are now considered Muslim by virtue of her “conversion.” Her husband has severed contact with her.

Summary: The victim was married to a prominent and wealthy businessman with two children, a girl and a boy. Every day, she took the children to private school in a hired private car. While waiting for their children, mothers meet and talk. One mother in particular, the taxi driver’s aunt, was very friendly. They began to buy each other a drink of juice or soda. The victim reported feeling odd after some of the drinks. On April 6, she took her children to school and noticed on the way back that the cab was going a different way home. They ended up at Al Azhar Mosque. She reported feeling physically helpless. She has little memory of what happened but now has a conversion document which states that she is single and has changed her religion. The document also states that any underage children will automatically become Muslims. Her name was changed to a Muslim name. She was given a Muslim ID. As she regained consciousness, she realized she was veiled. She was taken to another city in the Delta Region where she was locked up and kept in isolation. The family was able to trace her location through her mobile phone.

She was forced to sign papers divorcing her husband. For five months, she was never permitted to go out. She was not beaten. She was able to call her mother from time to time. She was frightened. On Sept. 10, the Muslim family left her on her own and she called her cousin who came to get her. Since that time, she has been living with her cousin and his family. They all receive regular threats.

Her husband, fearful that the children will be taken away and raised as Muslims, has cut off all contact with her. The victim and her attorney believe that the abduction happened because she was challenging the increased Islamic focus in her son’s school. If she changes her status back to Christian, the state will automatically take her children because of the document she signed.

**Case 6:**

Date of disappearance: February 4, 2011

Victim: 23-year-old single woman who lived with her parents

Source of information: Interview with victim’s father and family lawyer

Current status: There has been no contact with the victim since her disappearance.

Summary: The victim was 23 years old. She worked in a plastics factory and lived next door to her parents. She had lunch at home every day. On the evening of February 4, she went to evening church services with her mother. At the end of the evening, the mother could not find her daughter. She ran into the streets, and a little girl told her that a microbus full of girls stopped and took her daughter.

The family went to all the local hospitals, morgues, and coffee shops and surrounding communities to find their daughter. They have heard nothing since her disappearance. The father indicates that he tried to report the disappearance several times before his request was taken seriously. The anguished father told us, “Our daughter is illiterate – all she knows is home, work, church.” He felt that he needed to protect himself and so bought a gun. “Kids in the streets have pistols,” he said. “Why not me?”

The victim’s brother is equally devastated. He says he has three choices: to find his sister, to kill himself, or to wait for death.

The father knows of other families to whom this has happened and says, “Because we are Christians, we are slaughtered.”

**Case 7:**

Date of disappearance: October 2009

Victim: 24-year-old married woman

Source of information: Personal interview; family lawyer

Current status: Living with relatives, not able to find a place to live.  
Her husband is currently in prison.

Summary: The victim ran away from her parents and married a Christian man when she was 20 years old. Because of her parents’ disapproval and her husband’s inability to get a job, the couple had a difficult time finding a permanent location. When her husband was sent to prison for non-payment of a debt, her family ostracized her. At the same time, members from a Muslim social service organization reached out to her and offered her assistance. They took her and her young child to a house with other women and surgically removed her Coptic tattoo. Eventually her husband demanded her release and they lived together for a time. However, his numerous attempts at finding work failed and he is now once again in prison. The victim is not able to return to her village and she lives with her brother. She is under pressure to return to the Muslim service organization and she and her brother have been threatened and attacked.

**Case 8:**

Victim: Young mother of three daughters, ages 4, 7 and 11.

Source of information: Personal interview; family lawyer.

Current status: Children are still considered to be legally Muslim.

Victim’s father converted to Islam. It is customary that when a parent converts, all underage children are immediately converted as well. This affected 6 children in her family. Her mother took the youngest girls and placed them in the care of the Orthodox Church to protect them. They remained in an orphanage for 8 years. After her mother finally returned for her, the victim discovered that she and her siblings were legally Muslim. At the age of 18, she became engaged but her fiancé proved abusive and she returned to her family. When she applied for her own ID card, she was told she was Muslim. She married a Muslim police officer, feeling that there was no place else for her.

Eventually, her conversion was overturned; she left her Muslim husband and married a young Christian man who was also abusive. She has since left him. Her life is constantly threatened by the family of her first husband. Her daughters are considered to be Muslim because of her former status as a Muslim and she fears for their safety.

**Case 9:**

Date of disappearance: October 2009  
Victim: Married woman, 22 years old with a child.  
Source of information: Family lawyer and father.  
Current status: She is still missing and there has been no communication

Summary: The family had moved to Cairo 4 years prior to the abduction because the husband had found a job in the capital city. On the day of her disappearance, she left home with her child and has not been heard from since. Initially, the police refused to file a report and tried to accuse the husband.

Neither the lawyer nor the father has heard from the victim since her disappearance.

**Case 10:**

Date of disappearance: May 21, 2011  
Victim: Unmarried woman, 18 years old, living with her family  
Source of information: Family lawyer  
Current status: Victim has returned home but is considered legally married to a Muslim.

Summary: This young woman was drugged by a man working for her father. He subsequently abducted her, raped her and blackmailed her, threatening to harm her sister if she fought him. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of May, he took her to Alexandria and began pressuring her to marry him and convert to Islam. She was able to escape and call her father, who came to get her. She is now living at home; however, she is considered to be legally married to a Muslim and her identity card states her religion as Islam.

**Case 11:**

Date of disappearance: June 30, 2010  
Victim: Married woman with three children under 18  
Source of information: Personal interview with mother; family attorney  
Current status: The victim and her children remain missing. Her mother has had no personal contact with them and learned about their conversion on a YouTube video.

Summary: On June 30, 2010, the mother was admitted to the hospital. Her married daughter, who lived in another city, was planning to come and care for her. When she did not show up, the mother began to worry and called the husband, who said his wife had left as planned. She reported the disappearance to the police who reluctantly registered the disappearance of the young mother with three children. With no support from the authorities, the mother spent extensive personal resources trying to find indications of her family's whereabouts. She learned that her

daughter had been befriended by a Muslim woman in her neighborhood who also vanished the same day, and that her granddaughter had a close Muslim male friend at the university. She subsequently learned that her granddaughter married this man.

**Case 12:**

Date of disappearance: April 8, 2011

Victim: Young unmarried woman living with her father and brothers; 17 years old.

Source of information: Personal interview with father; police reports.

Current status: The father has had no communication with his daughter since her disappearance.

Summary: The father is a businessman who owns a cabinet-making company. His wife passed away and his daughter cared for the family. She was 17 years old. On April 8, 2011, she went to her tutorial class and never made it home. A Muslim girl called the father and told him that she was not well and would not come home. The father got friends together to look for her. Three days after her disappearance he filed a police report. The father was able to track the daughter’s movements by tracing the SIM card in her phone. There has been nothing on YouTube or other sites.

**Case 13:**

Date of Disappearance: August 9, 2010

Victim: Unmarried young woman, 18 years old.

Source of Information: Personal interview with brother

Current Status: There has been no contact with the victim since her disappearance.

Summary: The victim set out for a tutoring class but never arrived. In February 2011 she appeared fully veiled on YouTube saying that she had converted 5 months prior to leaving home. She said she had been able to see how the church does not make sense and is an act of evil. There has been no personal communication with her.

**Case 14:**

Date of disappearance: June 14, 2007

Victim: Young unmarried girl, 19 years old

Source of information: Personal interview with mother; family lawyer

Current status: The mother has seen her daughter one time since her abduction.

Summary: The young woman went to meet friends for pizza and never came home. Her friends said she was not feeling well and left the gathering early with a Muslim girl. The police reluctantly filed a report.

The family has had minimal contact with her and the mother has only seen her once since her abduction. The father learned that she was forced to marry a Muslim. The mother has heard reports that the daughter is being blackmailed with accusations of prostitution and that she feels trapped. The family launched an appeal on television stating that the family loved her and wanted her back, but there were no results.



**Case 15:**

Date of disappearance: June 4, 2010  
Victim: Single young woman living at home, 21 years old.  
Source of information: Attorney files  
Current Status: Still missing; no communication with family

Summary: The victim’s mother filed a missing persons report two days after her daughter disappeared. There has been no news from the daughter since her disappearance.

**Case 16:**

Date of Disappearance: June 20, 2010. Missing persons report filed July 31, 2010  
Victim: Married woman, 34 years old  
Source of Information: Attorney files, police report.  
Current Status: Still missing, no communication with family

Victim’s husband reported her missing. There has been no news since her disappearance.

**Case 17:**

Date of disappearance: June 20, 2010  
Victim: Unmarried young woman  
Source of information: Attorney files, police report.  
Current Status: Still missing; no communication with family.

**Case 18:**

Date of disappearance: October 12, 2010  
Victim: Unmarried young woman; 18 years old.  
Source of information: Attorney files  
Current status: Still missing; no communication with family,

The young woman was reported missing by her mother.

**Case 19:**

Date of disappearance: December 9, 2011  
Victim: Married woman with two children; 33 years old.  
Source of information: Website, police reports.  
Current Status: Still missing; no communication.

Summary: On December 9, 2011, at 8:30 PM, victim left home for a hairdresser appointment and to buy her little boy a present for his birthday; when she did not return, her family filed a missing persons report with the local police station. There was no record of her conversion. She has not returned and her family has not heard anything about her at the time of this writing.

**Case 20:**

Date of disappearance: November 24, 2011

Victim: Unmarried young girl living at home, 15 years old.

Source of information: Website, police report.

Summary: The victim disappeared on November 24, 2011. A report was filed at the local police station naming her abductor. There were witnesses to the abduction. The victim was returned to her home on January 11, 2012. The family is not releasing any information and will not talk publicly about the experience.

**Case 21:**

Date of disappearance: December 23, 2011

Victim: Unmarried girl living at home, 18 years old.

Source of information: Website, police records

Current status: Victim is still missing.

Summary: The victim disappeared on December 23, 2011. She left home to meet her private tutor and has not been seen since. Friends report that on several occasions prior to her disappearance, she was approached by individuals in cars, but that each time she ran away. Her family has heard nothing from her since her disappearance.