

**HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING  
MINORITY AT RISK: COPTIC CHRISTIANS IN EGYPT  
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**TESTIMONY OF MICHELE A. CLARK  
THE DISAPPEARANCE, FORCED CONVERSIONS AND FORCED  
MARRIAGES OF COPTIC CHRISTIAN WOMEN IN EGYPT**

It is an honor to be invited to testify before the Helsinki Commission today on the topic of the disappearance, forced conversions and forced marriages of Coptic Christian women in Egypt. Mr. Chairman, thank you for your leadership in this matter. Your sustained and strong voice in defense of vulnerable women worldwide continues to be an inspiration to many of us who work to end the scourge of human trafficking and for the empowerment of women.

Allegations of Coptic Christian women being lured into deceptive marriages by young Muslim men begin circulating in the international community as far back as the mid 1970s. As such practices became more numerous, they found their way into numerous official US Government reports including the US Department of States' Country Reports on Human Rights Practices beginning in 2006, the International Religious Freedom Reports and, in 2010, the Annual Report on Trafficking in Persons published by the US Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking. Always with notable disclaimers: "The reports are allegations." "The conversions are disputed." "Kidnappings are categorically denied."

In fact, these reports are not allegations nor should they be disputed. Coptic women disappear. Coptic women are forcibly converted, or converted under false pretenses, and Coptic women are forcibly married to Muslim men.

In November 2009, Christian Solidarity International and the Coptic Foundation for Human Rights released a report entitled, "The Disappearance, Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages of Coptic Christian Women in Egypt." I am the principal investigator and author of this report, working closely with Nadia Ghaly, a Coptic Christian activist. Together, we interviewed women who had been abducted or lured into deceptive relationships, forcibly converted, and married often against their will. We spoke with family members who lived in fear of reprisal after the young women escaped and returned home to live. We interviewed parish priests who witnessed and documented the disappearance of many of their young female congregants and monks and nuns who provide shelter and assistance to these young women once they escaped from an abusive situation. And we talked with human rights lawyers who are petitioning for the restoration of these women's religious identities.

I would like to present some of the key findings of my report. (Please note: the full copy of this report, including all references and detailed profiles, may be found at [http://www.csi-int.org/pdfs/csi\\_coptic\\_report.pdf](http://www.csi-int.org/pdfs/csi_coptic_report.pdf)).

**1. Coptic women and girls are deceptively lured into forced marriages with Muslim men and subsequently converted to Islam.**

Documented cases attend to forced conversions of Coptic women and girls to Islam and subsequent forced marriages to Muslim men. One parish priest in a large city indicated that, in his parish alone, there were 50 cases of such instances during the previous year. One bishop whose monastery has established two safe houses for young women returning from forced marriages claims that, "We are only one monastery and 45 women live with us."

These marriages and conversions take place under duress and frequently include abductions and physical abuse. Victims are reluctant to press charges against perpetrators for fear of reprisal. When charges have been filed, there is no documented evidence of a single conviction against the perpetrators.

Consider the following examples:

H. was befriended by a Muslim girl whose brother raped her. Ashamed to tell her [own family], she remained with the man's family during which time his mother persuaded her to convert to Islam and marry her son. She was locked into her apartment every day when her husband left for work and allowed to leave only with her in-laws. She was denied access to the telephone, made to cover herself when she left the house and was frequently beaten.

The father of a young abducted woman writes to President Mubarek, Mrs. Susan Mubarek, and other high level officials asking for assistance in finding his daughter: "Dear Honored Official: My daughter was kidnapped on February 2, 2005 by a Muslim boy who lives in the village of Balak al Dakoor in the outskirts of Cairo. My daughter is only 18 years old and could harm no one. I beg you to help me find my daughter as she is the apple of my eye and could harm no one."

Victims are reluctant to press charges against their perpetrators and, when charges have been filed, there is no documented evidence of convictions against the perpetrators.

Mrs. W. is the mother of a young woman who was abducted during Ramadan in 2006 while shopping. The family was able to identify the abductor by tracing messages left on their daughter's cell phone. The family reported the incident to the police and the perpetrator was arrested but released soon after. No charges were filed. She received a few phone calls from her daughter during the first year after the abduction but has not heard from her in over a year. Mrs. W. is very worried about her daughter who suffers from Rheumatic fever and severe anemia. Mrs. W. fears that if her daughter does not receive adequate medical attention, she will die. Mrs. W. has actively publicized her daughter's disappearance but, to this date, nothing is known about her whereabouts.

**2. The criminality of alleged forced marriages and conversions is generally dismissed by the authorities. Young women are presumed to be willing participants.**

The Egyptian government reports that young Coptic women marry and convert according to their own free will. It is assumed that many young women go off with a Muslim suitor in order to escape a rigid home environment, difficult economic circumstances, or out of adolescent petulance. These claims deserved to be addressed because they serve to create the impression of willing participation on behalf of the young women

Anti-trafficking experts increasingly recognize that one of the purposes of trafficking can include forced marriage. The anti-trafficking community further recognizes that one form of recruitment into trafficking takes the form of the seduction. In describing human Trafficking in the Netherlands, for example, the 2008 Trafficking in Persons Report states that "*Within the Netherlands, victims are often trafficked by so-called "lover-boys," men who seduce young women in order to coerce them into prostitution.*" The international anti-trafficking community recognizes this pattern of deception and recruitment into a fraudulent relationship and subsequent exploitation as a key element of many human trafficking cases and has developed extensive educational and prevention programs to address this particular phenomenon. Cases documented in my report show a similar pattern of enticement into seemingly genuine relationships for the purpose of forced marriage and conversion.

It is important to note that this façade of romance used for the purpose of deception and exploitation is a recognized pattern in related crimes against women and girls. Although some women do in fact consent to romance, they do not consent to the loss of identity that follows. According to Article 3 of the UN Trafficking Protocol, consent is irrelevant in defining a case of trafficking if there are elements of force, fraud or coercion. Such instances have been documented in my report.

**3. The abduction and/or disappearance of Coptic women and girls follow consistent patterns.**

Our research has shown that men, women and peers are used to build trust and dispel resistance in young women targeted for conversion and marriage. Most cases documented in our report begin with a trusting relationship that ultimately leads to a disappearance or abduction, marriage to a Muslim man, and conversion to Islam. These friendships may include school friends, an elder woman who fills the role of mother figure, a Muslim boyfriend or a benevolent provider. These relationships offer a sense of belonging, camaraderie and emotional financial support. In some cases, they also provide vital services and tangible forms of assistance in times of need. Once a sense of trust is developed, an invitation to leave home can be seen as an opportunity to escape current family problems, to fit in with peers, or to have fun. Such an invitation to romance or friendship is not perceived as a threat. These supposed new friends exploit the vulnerability and naïveté of young Coptic women.

Consider these real-life examples:

H. was befriended by a Muslim girl in her neighborhood who introduced H. to her brother. They spent time together and became friends. One day, the girlfriend announced an errand and left H. alone with her brother who subsequently raped her. Out of shame and fear of what her family would say, H. was persuaded to marry her rapist and convert to Islam.

R. was befriended by a Muslim girl in her neighborhood who introduced her to a male friend. This gentleman began to court R. One day, R went shopping with her suitor's sister. She was drugged and abducted.

The following relationship patterns are consistent in cases of forced conversion and/or forced marriages of Coptic women:

- Coptic girls are befriended by Muslim girls who are classmates or neighbors and who introduce the Christian girls to their families where they meet a Muslim man.
- Women and girls are befriended by older Muslim women who become a mother-figure and trusted confidante. This woman later provides material and emotional assistance during difficult times and introduced the Coptic girl to a Muslim man who can help.
- Women and girls are approached by a Muslim benefactor, sometimes a man or a woman, who offers services and assistance.
- Once trust has been established, girls are lured to an isolated place, drugged and kidnapped. Often, they are raped. Following a rape, the Coptic women experience shame and fear of how their families will respond. They become more willing to stay with the Muslim friends and marrying their rapist because they feel there is no place else to go.
- These marriages are usually accompanied by conversion to Islam at the insistence of the man's family. A new Muslim identity card is issued.
- Once married, Coptic women experience various forms of psychological and physical abuse including rape, beating, verbal abuse, confinement to their apartments, limited freedom of movement and isolation from their families.
- Women report that, once the marriage has taken place, the new couple or the mother-in-law receives some material benefit in the form of a new apartment or new furniture and a job for the husband.

Another point of interest is that, while Islam forbids a Muslim woman from marrying a non-Muslim man, a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman. In each of the cases documented for this report, conversions and marriages occurred within a few days of each other. In many cases, the young women protested their conversions; in order to secure their compliance, they were raped, beaten, threatened and occasionally drugged. It is necessary to inquire further as to why forced marriages of a Coptic woman to a Muslim man are accompanied by a conversion when Islamic law does not require this.

**4. Counseling sessions with members of their own clergy, traditionally part of the conversion process to Islam, are no longer available to potential converts to Islam.**

The process of conversion of a non-Muslim traditionally included a counseling session consisting of the prospective new convert and a member of the clergy of his/her faith of origin along with Muslim clergy. These sessions were intended to give the potential convert the chance to make an informed decision about his/her conversion after hearing from both sides. The former government has halted the practice of "requiring advice and guidance sessions with little warning or debate." Requests filed by human rights lawyers formally requesting that the Ministry of the Interior restore such counseling sessions were denied.

**5. Coptic women experience physical and psychological abuse both before and after their conversions and marriages.**

Coptic women experience frequent physical and psychological abuse including rape, beatings, forced isolation and lack of personal freedom both before and after their marriage/conversion. Cases of abduction, rape and physical violence are rarely filed in court. Examples of abuse and coercion include being forced to cover their bodies and faces when they leave their homes; not being able to leave except in the company of a relative or person trusted by the family; lack of access to telephones or other means of communicating with family; frequent beatings and rapes.

Consider the following cases:

R. was raped and beaten after having refused to have sex with her new husband. The Coptic cross, tattooed on her wrist to identify her as a Christian, was burned off with acid.

J. was raped by her abductor, with the help of his mother and sister, who was a classmate. (Case 14)

M. was befriended by a Muslim classmate. She left home and was taken to live with a Muslim woman and her son and was subsequently raped by the son. The Coptic cross on her wrist was surgically removed. She was married to her rapist who divorced her when she turned 18. She subsequently married her lawyer who prostituted her to his friends. She became pregnant and gave birth to a child.

**6. The Egyptian government does not restore the legal Christian identify of Coptic women who have returned to their faith communities of origin.**

The greatest challenge facing the women once they return from a situation of forced marriage and conversion is the restoration of their Christian identity cards. Without this document, they are still considered Muslim by the State. Frequently they are unable to remarry in the Church. For those women who are able to leave without their children, the children remain Muslim.

Conversion from Islam is considered to be an act of apostasy, even if the conversion is back to one's original religion, and as such is considered a crime worthy of the death penalty according to traditional Islamic law. Stringent penalties can be imposed upon those who chose to reconvert to Christianity. Legal precedents indicate that Christian identities have been restored once a Christian convert to Islam wants to return to his/her faith of origin but these are rare.

One Coptic human rights attorney currently counts 101 active cases to retrieve Christian identity cards before the courts, although not all are on behalf of Coptic women who experienced forced conversions and marriages. Other human rights attorneys cite similar caseloads. It is important to remember that these numbers reflect only those individuals who can afford to hire an attorney or who have decided to pursue legal proceedings. Since the majority of Coptic women are from economically challenged families, and many are intimidated by threats of harm to themselves or their families, they do not have this option. Even when a new identity card is issued, re-converts retain a permanent mark on their identity- these cards must now include the words "ex-Muslim". According to one human rights expert, "This essentially marks them as apostates and exposes them to persecution and attack."

Since the original report was published, there is evidence that numbers of reconversions are beginning to increase.

**7. Coptic women and girls are vulnerable to deception and fraudulent practices because of difficult home environments, economic pressures and sheltered lives.**

Social pressures, particularly the centrality of marriage to a woman's identity, combined many Coptic women's ignorance of the law are key factors in a girl's decision to convert to Islam. Family conflict and financial pressure are also cited as factors which may lead a young woman to explore conversion and marriage as a way of escaping a difficult situation. Most women who experienced forced conversions and marriages came from low-income families and were frequently minors at the time of their conversion. Many report coming from families experiencing extreme economic hardship, interpersonal strife and deaths of a parent or a child. Several illustrations from actual cases indicate that promises of escape from poverty and freedom from difficult family relationships were used as a means to entice women to form relationships outside of their normal community circles. One parish priest interviewed for the report stated that there are usually two motivations for a Coptic girl to be susceptible to the advances of a young Muslim man. The first is that the girl could be from an economically disadvantaged household. Marrying a Muslim man is usually presented as having some financial benefits. The second is that there is psychological pressure from peers at school; Coptic girls experience the desire to be "just like everyone else."

N. came from a poor family and worked as a maid. Confronted with growing family pressure over her unwillingness to marry the man they selected for her, N. went to live with the landlady of the building where she worked. During this time, her conversion to Islam was being arranged without her knowledge. She was presented with a new Muslim ID card, and soon after married a Muslim man. The Coptic Cross tattooed on her wrist was surgically removed. She was not allowed to see her family and could

leave her apartment only if accompanied by a female member of her husband's family, and fully veiled.

In some cases, the extremely vulnerable state of the women and girls makes them consider non-traditional options in order to gain support for their needs.

S. was 12 years old when she was married to a Christian man 26 years her senior. Within a few years, she had five children. The youngest was severely anemic and needed blood transfusions every month. N. could not afford the cost of blood. She was directed to a mosque where she was assigned a caretaker, Shabaan. A few months later, Shabaan proposed marriage but N. refused. She was forcibly driven to Al-Azhar and led through a conversion process. She and her daughter were subsequently held against her will at a facility where services were provided for her child. N. was kept in a secure part of the building, drugged and regularly taken to religious instruction classes.

**8. The Coptic Church has developed some safe houses for victimized women and girls.**

We visited a monastery that operates two safe houses for women escaping from forced conversions and marriages and who are not able to return to their families. One home for unmarried victims without children housed 25 young women at the time of this investigation. Another home for similarly victimized women who were married and able to leave their abusers with their children housed a similar number. Many of the young women in the first home were minors at the time of their conversions and marriages, and are still completing their secondary education. In their testimonies, women report being sent to shelters at other monasteries, but there is no accurate documentation on the number of safe houses and shelters operated by the Coptic Church. Fear of unwarranted attention from Egyptian authorities causes many church leaders to keep information on these shelters hidden.

The religious community meets the personal needs of and provides services for the young women in these shelters. If they have not finished school or wish to continue their education beyond secondary school, they attend classes at local schools. Some work at the monastery as cooks, maids and serving girls. Others are engaged in gardening or sewing; the objects they make are sold as a means of generating income for the homes. A resident nun supervises these houses and the young women. The homes we visited were clean and well furnished.

The religious orders consider it part of their responsibility to care for these girls and to provide a safe place for them. Threats of repercussion are common among all such returnees and the need for security is high. The girls who have returned with no children usually live there until the religious community finds another option for them. This is often an arranged marriage with a member of the Coptic community. Many, especially those who have children, remain in the monastery shelters for many years. Once a girl enters such a shelter, she usually does not leave unless she marries or returns to her family.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the preliminary findings of this report, we recommend that the Helsinki Commission actively pursue the following issues:

1. The reinstatement counseling sessions for those contemplating conversion to Islam by the Government of Egypt.
2. The restoration of Christian identity cards to former converts to Islam who decide to return to their original faith by the Government of Egypt.
3. The investigation of all allegations of kidnapping, rape and other acts of violence against women associated with forced marriages and conversion of Coptic women by the Government of Egypt.
4. The active use of pro-democracy funds by the US Government towards the strengthening of women's rights and religious freedom.

Thank you once again for your attention to this matter.



**Michele A. Clark**

Michele Clark is internationally recognized anti-trafficking expert and advocate on behalf of vulnerable women. From 2001 to 2005, she was the co-director of the Protection Project of the Johns Hopkins University School of International Studies (SAIS) in Washington, DC, a prestigious human rights institute focusing on eliminating trafficking in persons world-wide. While at the Protection Project, Ms. Clark conducted field investigations into the scope of the problem on human trafficking in Latin America, Europe, countries of the Former Soviet Union, the Middle East and North America. She has testified as an expert witness before numerous congressional committees on global anti-trafficking concerns. In 2005, Ms. Clark was named the Director of the Anti-Trafficking Assistance Unit at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe where she assisted the 56 OSCE member States with meeting the commitments of the OSCE Action Plan to Combat Trafficking in Persons. She developed and was the first editor of an ongoing publication entitled, Working Papers on Combating trafficking in the OSCE Region. Through the design and development of numerous high-level conferences, Ms. Clark helped to draw attention to emerging trends in the battle against TIP. She was a member of the Steering Committee for the UN-GIFT Vienna Forum in February, for which she wrote one of the three conference background papers.

Ms. Clark is now a consultant to government, international and non-profit organizations in the development of comprehensive anti-trafficking programs and continues to conduct field research, write and speak on emerging issues in trafficking. She is an adjunct professor at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs where she teaches courses on human trafficking, women in global politics, and contemporary dissident movements. She is the recipient of numerous fellowships and awards including, most recently, the Bender Award for Excellence in Teaching.