

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

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PREFACE

Reports of Muslim men abducting and forcibly marrying and converting Coptic Christian women and girls have filtered out of Egypt with increasing frequency over the past decade. The emerging patterns of force, fraud and coercion correspond to definitions of human trafficking used by the United Nations and the U.S. Department of State., with the UN identifying it as a “crime against humanity”.¹ These violations of fundamental human rights appear to be encouraged by the prevalence of cultural norms in Egypt - often rooted in Islamic traditions – that legitimize violence against women and non-Muslims. They appear to be further abetted by the tacit complicity of the government as evidenced by its lack of willingness to thoroughly investigate allegations of rape, abduction and abuse or to reinstate policies designed to protect Egyptians from coerced conversion by educating potential converts of the full implications of conversion.

Details of trafficking cases involving Copts often reach the West through desperately worried relatives of victims. When the Egyptian police fail to find and return (or often even search for) victims of abduction, forced marriage and conversion, some relatives summon the courage to release information and photos to Coptic human rights organizations in the diaspora.

The violent abuse of Coptic women and girls in connection with forced marriage and conversion is not altogether new. The Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church, Pope Shenouda III, protested against this phenomenon in 1976, declaring: "There is pressure being practiced to convert Coptic girls to Islam and marry them under terror to Muslim husbands."² But the issue has now reached boiling point within Egypt's Coptic community. As the prestigious Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram Weekly* recently noted:

“It is the question of the alleged conversion and forced marriage of Coptic girls to Muslim men that elicits the greatest passions. In July [2009] alone three separate incidents received much publicity in the press. Pharmaceuticals student Rania Tawfik Asaad was ostensibly abducted in Giza and forced to marry a Muslim. Two other cases, those of Marian Bishai, Amira Morgan and Injy Basta, also hit the headlines.”³

Despite the accumulation of substantial evidence and the expressions of concern by the most senior leader of the Coptic community, this aspect of human trafficking has scarcely

¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. “Human Trafficking.”

<[http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html#What is Human Trafficking](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/human-trafficking/what-is-human-trafficking.html#What%20is%20Human%20Trafficking)>.

U.S. Department of State. Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000.

<<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/10492.pdf>>.

² Mary Abdelmassih. AINA, “Family of abducted Christian Coptic Teenager Assaulted by Muslim Mob”, Cairo, June 9, 2009.

<<http://www.middleeastinfo.org/forum/index.php?s=55b76635a04dc0eaa7ccbbe44fda9bf2&showtopic=16332>>.

³ *Al-Ahram Weekly* On-line, 3-9 September 2009; no.963. <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2009/963/eg7.htm>>.

been acknowledged by the world's most powerful human rights institutions, including those dedicated to the issue of trafficking in persons.

The Coptic Foundation for Human Rights and Christian Solidarity International (CSI) therefore commissioned an anti-trafficking specialist, Michele Clark, and a Coptic women's rights advocate, Nadia Ghaly, to undertake an investigation of allegations surrounding the abductions and forced marriages and conversions to Islam in Egypt. They performed outstanding pioneering work, interviewing victims, their relatives, lawyers, priests and other Coptic community leaders.

This report documents dozens of specific cases and demonstrates consistent patterns used by the perpetrators, their victims, government and law enforcement, and members of Egypt's faith communities. The report concludes with a valuable set of practical and critical recommendations for the Coptic community, the Government of Egypt and the international community.

The findings of Ms. Ghaly and Ms. Clark are deeply disturbing, and should 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.



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I INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

Christians in Egypt today comprise between 8 and 12 percent of the country's population of nearly 80 million people, the majority of whom belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church.⁴ Despite their significant numbers, however, the Copts live as a marginalized and disadvantaged religious minority. Egypt is an Islamic state. Islam is the "religion of state" and Islamic law – Shariah – is "the principal source of legislation", according to the Egyptian Constitution.⁵ This marginalization is notably reflected by the absence of Copts in positions of elected or appointed political office:

"There are no Christians serving as presidents or deans of public universities, and they are rarely nominated by the Government to run in elections as National Democratic Party (NDP) candidates. Christians, who represent between 8 and 12 percent of the population, hold less than 2 percent of the seats in the People's Assembly and Shura Council.

As of June 30, 2008, there were 6 Christians (5 appointed, 1 elected) in the 454-seat People's Assembly; 6 Christians (all appointed) in the 264-seat Shura Council; 2 in the 32-member cabinet; and one governor of the country's 28 was Christian. There are few Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. Public funds compensate Muslim imams but not Christian clergy.

Government practices discriminated against Christians in hiring for the public sector and staff appointments to public universities, and barred them from study at Al-Azhar University (a publicly funded institution)."⁶

As a consequence of their lack of political power, the Coptic Christian population is vulnerable to various forms of oppression, discrimination and violence. Forms of oppression include "abusive practices of local police and security forces, by the refusal of security officials to defend them or to prosecute those who have attacked them, and by systematic and discriminatory Egyptian government policies."⁷

One particular form of violence against the Coptic Community is the disappearance followed by forced conversions and marriages of Coptic Christian women.⁸

The United States Government has reported alleged instances of young Coptic girls being forced to convert to Islam and marry Muslim men. The 2008 International Religious Freedom Report states that there were "...reports of forced conversion of Coptic women

⁴ Marshall, Paul A, Editor. *Religious Freedom in the World*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Lanham, Md. 2008. p. 156

⁵ Eibner, John, Editor, *Christians in Egypt: Church under Siege*, Institute for Religious Minorities in the Islamic World, Zürich, 1993, pp. 7-10

⁶ *International Religious Freedom Report 2008*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, US Department of State. <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108481.htm>>

⁷ Marshall, Paul A, Editor. *Religious Freedom in the World*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Lanham, Md. 2008. p. 158

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 159

and girls to Islam by Muslim men. Reports of such cases are disputed and often include inflammatory allegations and categorical denials of kidnapping and rape.”⁹

A notable case resulting in nationwide protests by the Coptic Community was the alleged abduction and forced conversion to Islam of Wafaa Constantine Messiha, the wife of an Egyptian Coptic priest in Egypt, in 2006.¹⁰ According to Emil Zaki, vice president of the U.S. Coptic Association, “The Egyptian government has barred foreign journalists from attending the [protest] rallies. Only state-run and Arabic networks have been allowed to report from the protest sites. Indeed, the only media outlet with footage of the protests, *Al Jazeera*, reported Messiha was not kidnapped but willingly converted to Islam and ran away with her husband.”¹¹ An internet search for international press coverage on this affair in fact failed to produce any articles in mainstream media outlets.

Cases of abduction, forced conversion and marriage are usually accompanied by acts of violence which include rape, beatings deprivation of food and other forms of physical and mental abuse. According to conversations with members of the Coptic clergy who are concerned with such instances in their communities, most cases go unreported to the local authorities and, in rare instances where reports of abduction or assault have been filed, the perpetrators of such offenses have never suffered any legal consequences.

The phenomenon of abductions, forced conversions and marriages of Coptic women by Muslim men remains relatively undocumented, under-reported and generally ignored by the international human rights community. This lack of attention stems from complex social, religious and political factors that include:

- The reluctance of victims who escape abusive situations to file charges out of fear or retribution against themselves or their families;
- The absence of convictions of kidnappers and rapists when charges have been filed;
- A sense of shame and dishonor which falls upon the victim and her family which frequently accompanies crimes of rape and sexual abuse;
- The erroneous presumption of complicity of Coptic women who are seen as entering into voluntary relationships with Muslim men.

Each of these factors will be addressed further within the body of this report.

There is yet another important factor that works to stay the hand of the international human rights community. The Islamic world does not readily acknowledge its own discrimination and violence against non-Muslims. Such abuse remains covered in a cloak of silence and tacit acceptance, even though it is against the constitutional affirmations of civil rights. When non-Muslims call public attention to such violations of human rights, they are often branded as Islamophobes.

⁹ International Religious Freedom Report 2008, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, US Department of State. <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108481.htm>>.

¹⁰ "Christians Protest Kidnapping, Forced Conversion: Wife of Coptic Priest Allegedly Taken by Muslim Extremists in Egypt." Klein, Aaron. *WorldNetDaily.com*. 06 Dec. 04. <http://www wnd com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=41805>.

¹¹ *Ibid*

The lives of Coptic women subjected to forced marriages and conversions usually remain so heavily burdened with social and legal problems after they have escaped from their Muslim husbands and in-laws that anything like a normal life is impossible. Because of their conversion to Islam, they were given new identity cards listing their religion as Islam. While they may be successful in obtaining a divorce from their Muslim husbands, they are rarely able to obtain a reversal of their religious status. According to a recent report by Human Rights Watch,

“There are hundreds of known cases of Coptic Egyptians who converted to Islam and subsequently decided to return to Christianity. The reasons why Christians convert to Islam are numerous, including marriage and divorce, and improved social and economic opportunities, as well as religious conviction. They typically face no difficulties converting to Islam and acquiring identity documents recognizing their conversions, but those who subsequently wish to return to Christianity meet with refusal and harassment from the Civil Status Department (CSD) of the Ministry of Interior.”¹²

Conversion to Islam is considered non-retractable and any attempt to revert to one’s faith of origin is considered a form of apostasy – a capital offense according to Islamic law. Because re-conversion is not permissible, it is impossible for Coptic women returning to Christianity to obtain new identity cards. Identity cards, which carry a person’s religion, are required in Egypt and are necessary for employment, education, and access to public services. The Egyptian government’s intransigence carries wide-ranging consequences for those women wishing to resume their lives as Christians.

“The CSD’s refusal to grant national ID cards recognizing the Christian identities of persons who re-convert from Islam forces these individuals to live with a dual identity – Christian in their faith, but Muslim in the eyes of the state and much of society ... They have difficulty marrying because potential Christian partners fear they risk excommunication from the church for having married Muslims, that they will be subjected to Muslim personal status laws, and that their children will automatically be classified as Muslim.”¹³

II Purposes and Methodology of this Report

Moved by the consistent presence of such instances which are frequently accompanied by violence and abuse, Christian Solidarity International (CSI) and the Coptic Foundation for Human Rights commissioned an investigation of allegations of forced marriages and conversions of Coptic women and girls in order to determine the extent of the problem, the accuracy of the allegations and to raise the plight of Coptic women before the international human rights community.

¹² Human Rights Watch. “Prohibited Identities: State Interference with Religious Freedom”. November 2007 Volume 19, No. 7(E) p. 66

¹³ Ibid., p. 67

Two separate visits were made to Egypt for the purposes of identifying victims of reported abuses and documenting instances of forced conversion and marriage (March 2005 and November 2008). This report includes:

- Interviews with women who were abducted or lured into relationships/marriages with Muslim men and forced to convert to Islam, and family members of victims. These interviews were arranged by their attorneys. It is important to note here that these interviews represented only a small number of existing case loads. Furthermore, this sample is also limited in that it represents only those women who are able to afford the cost of an attorney. These women will be referred to by their first names.
- Interviews with the bishop of a monastery who acts as the administrator of two safe houses for young women who have returned from forced marriages and conversions and with the nun who oversees the safe houses (November 2008). For reasons of security, their real names will not be used.
- Interview with a parish priest who is disturbed by the instances of forced marriage and conversion among his church and who documents cases that come to his attention. For reasons of privacy, his real name will not be used.
- Interviews with human rights attorneys.
- Reviews of cases provided by human rights attorneys and members of the Coptic clergy.

This report was written by Nadia Ghaly and Michele Clark. The authors would like to especially acknowledge the courage of those women who agreed to be interviewed for the purpose of this study.

III KEY FINDINGS

III.1 Coptic women and girls are deceptively lured into forced marriages with Muslim men and conversions to Islam.

Documented cases attest to forced conversions of Coptic women and girls to Islam and forced marriages to Muslim men. Father P. indicated that in his parish alone, there were over 50 cases of such instances during the year prior to this interview. Bishop M., whose monastery has established two safe houses for young women returning from forced marriages and conversions, claims, "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. Examples cited in this narrative are extracted from interviews conducted with victims and cases provided by human rights attorneys, which are summarized in Appendix A of this report.

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. (Case 1)

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." (Case 23)

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. (Case 3)

Young women under the age of 18 are targets of forced conversion and marriage. The 2008 Religious Freedom Report states that "According to the Government's Instructions for Notaries Public, which implement law Number 114 of 1947, persons age 16 and above may convert to Islam without parental consent." This provision is used as a rationale for the conversion of minors.

R. was 17. She was befriended by a Muslim girl in her neighborhood who introduced her to a Muslim man, Amir, who began to court her. One day, R. went shopping with his sister. She was drugged and abducted. She awoke to find herself held captive by Amir and some of his friends and family. She was converted to Islam and married to Amir. When she refused to have sex with her new husband, he raped her, and suffered repeated beatings. The Coptic cross tattooed on her wrist was burned off with acid. (Case 5)

III.2 Criminality of alleged forced marriages and conversions are generally dismissed by the Egyptian authorities. Young women are presumed to be willing participants in the marriages and conversions.

The Egyptian government reports that the women marry and convert according to their own free will.

“The quasi-governmental National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) in its fourth report, issued in March 2008, reported that it received 35 complaints from Christian families alleging that their daughters were missing. The NCHR referred these complaints to the Ministry of Interior, which in most cases replied that the women had eloped with Muslim men, converted to Islam of their free will, and had chosen to leave their families without prior notice because they feared reprisal on the part of their families.”¹⁴

Thus it is assumed that many young women go off with a male suitor of their own free will in order to escape a rigid home environment or an arranged marriage with someone they do not love. This observation merits being addressed within a broader context of recognized criminal patterns, notably those of human trafficking. Fraudulent marriage for the purpose of abuse and exploitation of women and girls is not unique to Egypt.

Anti-trafficking experts increasingly recognize that one of the purposes of trafficking in human beings can include forced marriage.¹⁵ As such, definitions of the acts, means and purposes of trafficking in human beings as described in article 3 of the United Nations Protocol To Prevent, Suppress And Punish Trafficking In Persons, Especially Women And Children, Supplementing The United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime can apply to abductions for the purpose of forced marriage of Coptic women to Muslim men. The process of luring a woman into a relationship for the purpose of forced marriage, when accompanied by force, fraud or coercion (as the cases of the Coptic women have already demonstrated) constitutes an act of trafficking.

For example, in describing human trafficking in the Netherlands, the US Government’s 2008 Trafficking in Persons Report states that, “Within the Netherlands, victims are often trafficked by so called “lover boys”—men who seduce young women and girls and coerce them into prostitution.”¹⁶ Both the US and the Dutch governments recognize that one form of recruitment consists of men who seduce young women in order to coerce them into prostitution. The international anti-trafficking community recognizes this pattern of deception of fraudulent relationships and subsequent exploitation as a key element in many human trafficking cases and has developed prevention and public education strategies to address this particular phenomenon. Similarly, cases documented in this report show a pattern of enticement into seemingly genuine relationships for the purpose of exploitation, forced marriage, and conversion. It is important to

¹⁴ *International Religious Freedom Report 2008*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, US Department of State. <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108481.htm>>.

¹⁵ See, for example, *Effectiveness of Legal Frameworks and Anti-Trafficking Legislation*,” a background paper prepared for the Vienna Forum to Fight Human Trafficking, February 13-15, 2008, and the *Proceedings of the First Meeting of the Association of Trafficking in Persons Scholars*, Delivered at the Third Annual Symposium on the Economics of Human Trafficking, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, November 10, 2008).

¹⁶ *Trafficking in Persons Report 2008*, Trafficking in Persons Office, US Department of State, p. 191. <<http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2008/105388.htm>>.

understand that this façade of romance used for the purpose of deception and exploitation is a recognized pattern in related crimes against women and girls, namely human trafficking. Although some of the women consent to romance, they do not consent to the loss of identity, isolation, and forced conversion that follow. According to Article 3 of the UN Trafficking Protocol, consent is irrelevant in defining the crime as human trafficking if there are elements of force, fraud, and coercion, as there are in the cases documented in this report. Consent to an initial relationship, therefore, does not imply consent to subsequent instances of abuse, forced marriage or force conversion, given the presence of force, fraud, exploitation, and the abuse of vulnerability, all of which are in the United Nations' definition of human trafficking.

The cases documented in this report clearly show the presence of fraudulent relationships and forced marriages that turn into situations of extreme abuse:

Seventeen year old R. received a call, the polite young man introduced himself as Amir and said that he was an admirer of hers. He wanted to meet her in a church. She was drugged, kidnapped, and when she woke up, “Amir” told her that he was in reality Wali ... She was given the name Fatima, beaten every day, forced to wear a black veil, and marry a man named Mahmoud whom she had never met. When she refused to have sex with Mahmoud, his family held her down while he raped her. She began bleeding profusely. She is unable to have children as a result of the rape. (Case 5)

Seventeen year old S. was kept sedated until her conversion and marriage were complete. Her family did not hear from her for three years. The police responded to her parents saying she must have run off into a relationship with her abductor. In Cairo, S. worked as a servant to the first wife of the man who abducted her. She was paid nothing for her services and was given a very small amount of money to feed her children. She and her children were not allowed to eat with the rest of the household. They slept in a basement where there were no windows, no electricity and no ventilation. (Case 20)

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

This investigation has shown that means of enticement into a relationship leading to conversion and marriage involve the use of use of women as well as men to build trust and dispel resistance.

Most cases referenced in this report began with a trusting relationship that ultimately led to disappearance or abduction and finally marriage to a Muslim man and conversion to Islam. These friendships may include a school friend or peer; an older women who fills the role of a mother figure, a Muslim boyfriend, or a benevolent provider. These relationships offer a sense of belonging, camaraderie and emotional as well as financial support. In some cases, they also provide vital services and tangible forms of assistance in the case of need. These supposed new friends exploit

the vulnerability of young Coptic women for the purposes of forced marriage and conversion. Given the sense of trust developed, an invitation to leave home can be perceived 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 necessarily perceived as a threat or danger.

Helen was befriended by a Muslim girl in her neighborhood who introduced her to her brother. The brother subsequently raped her. Out of shame and fear to return to her family, Helen was persuaded to marry her rapist and convert to Islam. (Case 1)

M. was befriended by a young Muslim boy at school. This friendship was encouraged by her downstairs' neighbor, a Muslim girl her own age who was also a classmate. M. was subsequently drugged and abducted and held in confinement for over six months. (Case 2)

R. was befriended by a Muslim girl in her neighborhood who introduced her to a Muslim man who began to court her. One day she went shopping with his sister. She was drugged and abducted. (Case 4)

The following relationship patterns are consistently observed in cases of forced conversion and/or forced marriage of Coptic women to Muslim men.

- Girls are befriended by Muslim girls who are classmates or neighbors, and who introduce the Coptic girl to their families where they meet a Muslim man.
- Women and girls are befriended by an older Muslim woman who becomes a mother figure and trusted confidante. This woman later provides material and emotional assistance during difficult times and introduces the Coptic girl to a Muslim man.
- Women and girls are approached by a Muslim benefactor, sometimes a man or woman, who offers necessary services and assistance.
- Once trust has been established, the women and girls are lured into an isolated place and raped. Following a rape, Coptic women experience shame and fear of how their families will respond. They become more willing to consider staying with the Muslim family and marrying their abductors. These marriages are usually accompanied by conversion to Islam at the insistence of the man's family. A new Muslim identity card is usually issued immediately by the state.
- Once married, girls experience various forms of psychological and physical abuse from rapes and beatings to verbal abuse, confinement to their apartments and isolation from their families.
- Women report that, once the marriage has taken place, the new couple receives a material benefits. These can include a new apartment and furniture as well as a job for the unemployed husband.
- It is almost impossible for the woman to get her Christian identity card back, a fundamental freedom and requirement for all Egyptian citizens.

Islam forbids a Muslim woman from marrying a non-Muslim man. However, a Muslim man may marry a non-Muslim woman without her conversion to Islam. In the cases examined for this report, conversions and marriages usually occur

simultaneously or within days of each other. Conversions are not initiated by the Coptic girls themselves. In many cases, the young women protest their conversion; in order to secure compliance, the women are often raped, beaten, threatened and occasionally drugged by the man who eventually becomes her husband and/or members of his family. It is therefore necessary to inquire further as to why forced marriages of a Coptic woman to a Muslim man are accompanied by a conversion.

III.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 a chance to listen to representatives from each religion in order to make an informed decision about conversion. However, the government reportedly halted the practice of requiring “advice and guidance sessions with little warning or debate.” These guidance sessions had been critical in that they provided a way to ensure that converts fully understood the consequences of their conversion.¹⁷

On February 23, 2008, human rights attorney Naguib Gibraeel filed a suit requesting that the Ministry of the Interior reinstate the counseling sessions. Dr. Gibraeel indicated in his suit that the counseling session was a fair practice instituted with the intent to present the prospective convert with the opportunity to understand the full implications of conversion. Dr. Gibraeel further added that the government did not provide any clear justification for terminating the counseling sessions and that the suspension of such a practice reinforced the lack of real religious freedom in Egypt. Dr. Gibraeel’s request was denied in September 2008.

According to Bishop M., it is problematic that the church is not able to speak to the young women before they convert to Islam and inform them of the consequences of their decision. During the marriage, these consequences can include rejection by their families and communities of origin. For those who leave a Muslim marriage with the knowledge of their husbands or who manage to escape with the help of members of their family, consequences can include the loss of their Christian identities, loss of rights to their children, difficulty in re-marrying, and even denial of a Christian burial, since they are legally registered as Muslims. Father P. indicates that the number of conversions of Coptic girls to Islam has increased in his parish since the suspension of the counseling sessions.

III.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

¹⁷ *International Religious Freedom Report 2008*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, US Department of State. <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108481.htm>>.

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.

R. was raped and beaten after having refused to have sex with her new husband. The Coptic cross tattooed on her wrist was burned off with acid. (Case 5)

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 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. (Case 17)

S. disappeared and was subsequently raped by her abductors. She was married to a Muslim lawyer and lived with him for five years as a domestic servant in slave-like conditions. (Case 20)

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

According to Bishop M., 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. Stringent penalties are to be imposed upon those who chose to reconvert to Christianity.¹⁸

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.

"On April 24, 2007, the Court of Administrative Justice ruled that the Interior Ministry was not obliged to recognize conversion to Christianity by Christian-born converts to Islam...This ruling was inconsistent with verdicts issued over the past 3 years by the same court on behalf of 32

¹⁸ "'Grave Crime' to Convert and Re-Convert, Azhar Rules Penalize 'Re-Conversion': Egyptian Fatwa Says." *Al Arabiya News Channel*. 20 Jan. 2008.

<<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/01/20/44471.html>>.

converts and functioned to support a government policy not to provide legal means for converts to Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status.” This means that, although few Christian converts to Islam have been able to regain their Christian identity cards, on the whole the Egyptian government does not consider legal precedent in refusing the appeals of the majority of women seeking to regain their Christian identity cards.¹⁹

Human rights attorney Naguib Gibraeel 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.”²⁰

III.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 with 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. Father P. claims 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.” At no time are they told that they will eventually be married to a Muslim man and forced to convert to Islam.

¹⁹ *International Religious Freedom Report 2008*, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, US Department of State. <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2008/108481.htm>>.

²⁰ Marshall, Paul. *Egypt’s Identity Crisis: Religious tolerance for some*. *The Weekly Standard*. Volume 013, Issue 24. March 3, 2008

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. (Case 4)

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.

N. 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 care-taker, 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. (Case 18)

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

The leader of the Coptic Church, Pope Shenouda, has condemned the abductions and forced conversions of Christian women.²¹ Bishop M's monastery operates two safe houses for women escaping from forced conversions and marriages 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 these shelters on a very low profile. For example, repeated calls to the bishop of one monastery requesting an interview for this report went unanswered.

In the 2009 Trafficking in Persons report, the US State Department specifically noted the Egyptian Government's absence of adequate protection services for

²¹ Marshall, Paul A, Editor. *Religious Freedom in the World*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. Lanham, Md. 2008. p. 158

victims of trafficking.²² This critical deficiency is particularly apparent in the lives of the women this report documents.

The needs of the young women in the shelters are provided for by the religious community. 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 does not have the option to leave other than for marriage or to return to her family. Many Coptic families do not take their daughters back. One reason is security, since families can also be threatened. Another is the prevailing sentiment within the Coptic community that what happened to the girls has brought disgrace upon the family.

Our report shows that some Coptic women who leave their Muslim husbands are not accepted back by their families. They then seek assistance from their parish priests who send them to one of the Coptic monasteries equipped with a shelter. For their own safety and protection, they no longer live in their native towns or villages.

III.9 Coptic Women who return/escape from a forced marriage and conversion find it very difficult to return to normal life.

Coptic women find it difficult to return to normal life following their return. They face obstacles from the government, from their abductors and often from their own community. They are frequently viewed as “fallen” women and are often considered transgressors. While some families do take their daughters back, others feel that the sense of disgrace and shame is too overwhelming. And still others fear consequences from their former husbands.

Helen is seeking a divorce and the return of her Christian identity papers. She and her sister continue to receive threatening phone calls. She moves constantly to avoid detection and never leaves home unless she is accompanied by male relatives. (Case 1)

²² *Trafficking in Persons Report 2009*, Trafficking in Persons Office, US Department of State, p. 125.
<<http://www.state.gov/g/tip/rls/tiprpt/2008/105387.htm>>.

N. is officially considered a Muslim woman. She is now married to a Coptic man and has three children. She wants her Christian identity to be restored. Her husband is not able to find work because of what has happened to her. She is afraid of her children's reactions once they learn of her past. (Case 4)

H. no longer lives in her native village for fear of her safety. (Case 16)

N. is trying to get her Christian identities back. She and her children live on donations from the church and move from house to house for fear that her children will be kidnapped. (Case 18)

S.'s father was arrested, imprisoned for three weeks and beaten in an effort by authorities to discover his daughter's location following her escape. After his release, he fled the country. S.'s mother and brother live in fear for their lives and S. remains in hiding. (Case 20)

The only option for many of these young women is to remain in a shelter provided by monasteries where they and their children live as servants to the monks. Young women who have returned find it difficult to marry and must often accept arranged marriages with elderly or widowed members of their communities. Families who accept their daughters back into their homes are often subject to threats and harassment. Many feel that seeking asylum is their best option since their lives can no longer be normal after a daughter is returned. Women who return and marry find that their husbands are not able to find work. Many move away from their families and consequently their natural support networks, exacerbating a sense of both isolation and shame.

IV CONCLUSIONS

Allegations and anecdotal evidence of forced conversions and marriages of young Coptic Christian women to Muslim men are sufficiently supported by preliminary research to warrant further investigation, concerted efforts of public education and information programs and increased support and assistance activities. Furthermore, documentation from human rights attorneys as well as members of the Coptic clergy indicates sufficiently large numbers so as to dispel any notion that these are isolated cases.

Acts of forced conversion and marriage are de facto assisted by the Egyptian government. The government has suspended required counseling sessions for prospective converts to Islam. These previously required sessions helped protect Coptic women from coerced conversions and the traumatic consequences that follow. The government also refuses to restore Christian identity cards to Christian converts to Islam who desire to return to their original religion notwithstanding rare recent cases where such documents have been restored. These actions contribute to a climate of religious intolerance.

Acts of forced conversion and marriage appear to follow consistent patterns wherein young women who come from vulnerable situations due to economic hardships or stressful family situations are enticed into harmful relationships. Acts of violence including rape and other forms of physical abuse as well as psychological abuse are recurring themes.

V RECOMMENDATIONS

Three sets of recommendations arise from this study. The first set is directed to the Government of Egypt and its role in preserving religious freedom for all citizens and in protecting the human rights of all citizens, including those of religious minorities. The second set of recommendations is directed towards the Coptic Christian community in Egypt and abroad. Finally, the third set is directed towards the international community.

V.1 Recommendations to the Egyptian Government

V.1.1. The Government of Egypt should reinstate counseling sessions for those contemplating conversion to Islam.

V.1.2. The Government of Egypt should expedite the restoration of Christian identity cards to former converts to Islam who decide to return to their original faith given that legal precedent for such decisions exists. Furthermore, the Egyptian Government should return these cards without prejudice and with no mention of any previous conversion.

V.1.3. The Egyptian Government should investigate and prosecute all allegations of kidnapping, rape and other acts of violence against women associated with forced marriages and conversion of Coptic women.

V.2 Recommendations for the Coptic Church

The Coptic Church together with its inter-religious dialogue and ecumenical partners, especially the World Council of Churches, needs to establish modern programs for the prevention of forced conversions and marriages and for the protection and rehabilitation of Coptic women and girls who are able to regain their freedom. Such programs should include:

V.2.1. The development of training and education programs to inform young girls about the potential dangers of forced conversion and marriage and to teach them to recognize possible patterns of enticement.

V.2.2. The establishment of a network of shelters, safe houses and counseling centers for the benefit of young women who return from abusive situations.

V.2.3. The Coptic Church abroad should provide leadership and resources in developing educational training programs aimed at prevention of abductions, forced conversions and marriages and towards the rehabilitation of victims of such crimes.

V.3 Recommendations for the International Community

V.3.1. Given that the anti-trafficking community recognizes forced marriage accompanied by fraud, coercion and exploitation as human trafficking, the plight of Coptic women in Egypt should be recognized and included in this discussion.

V.3.2. International religious freedom organizations should continue with resolve their advocacy for Coptic women as they engage government entities and communicate with the public.

V.3.3. Organizations and government offices advocating for the rights of women should take seriously and speak out in response to the violent abuse of Coptic Egyptian women.

V.3.4. The international NGO community and their national partners in Egypt should incorporate this serious human rights violation into their agendas.

V.3.5. The UN Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief should examine the plight of missing, abused, forcibly married and forcibly converted Coptic women and girls in Egypt.

DOCUMENTED CASES OF FORCED MARRIAGE AND CONVERSION

- I Interviews conducted in November 2008 (Cases 1 – 5)
- II Cases provided by parish priest (Cases 5 – 10)
- III Interviews conducted in March 2005 (Cases 10 – 25)

*Victim's complete names have been withheld for security purposes.

Case 1: H.

**Disappeared at age 19
Cairo, Egypt**

H. arrived at the offices of Attorney Naguib Gibraceel, where we conducted the interview, accompanied by her sister, her brother and her male cousin. She never leaves the house alone anymore and is usually driven to her destinations by a male relative. She is an attractive, slender and soft-spoken young woman. We asked her to tell us her story.

She finished middle school. When her father died, she dropped out of school. There were financial and emotional problems in the family and when she was 18 she, her mother and her sister moved to their own residence. She became friends with a Muslim girl in her neighborhood and this friend had a brother. He was 26, average looking and worked with his father in a furniture factory. He harassed her.

We asked her to clarify what that phrase meant. She was visibly uncomfortable. We asked the men to leave the room. H explained that, in her case, harassment meant rape. When visiting her girlfriend, the brother would often make advances. On one of her visits, she found herself alone with the brother. He raped her.

H returned home. She was ashamed and didn't feel that she could tell her family what had happened because they would blame the incident on her. Her rapist began to stalk her and threatened her and her sister. Feeling that it had become impossible for her to remain at home, she returned to the man's family where the man's mother convinced her to marry her son. She told H. that she would be safe with them and they would treat her like their own daughter. She reports that her rapist acted in a contrite manner and said he wanted to make amends for his behavior.

She married and converted to Islam. The couple was provided with a furnished apartment in which to live. After her conversion, the family began to act differently towards her. They feared that she would report the assault and told her that if she told anyone what had happened she and her family would be harmed.

She was abused both physically and psychologically. She was required to veil herself completely, including her face, whenever she went out. She was not allowed to leave the apartment by herself. She had no access to the telephone and was not allowed to communicate with her family. Her husband locked her inside the apartment every day when he went to work. If she wanted to leave, it was always in company of the mother-in-law or sister. During this time her family was also threatened.

After two months, H. determined that she had to leave. She contacted her mother when she was alone and asked for help. Her mother visited her, but was told by H.'s mother-in-law that H. was married and a Muslim, and that there was nothing the family could do for her. H.'s mother was told, "Don't come here anymore; don't try to get her back."

The abuse and confinement continued. When the family was again away, she called her mother and told her that she wanted to come home. They developed a plan.

H. requested permission for her mother to visit. Her mother arrived, driven by a family friend who waited in a car. H.'s husband left, but did not lock the door since H.'s mother would have to leave. As soon as he was gone, her mother took H. out of the house, into the neighbor's car and home.

Since H. had become a troublemaker, her husband's family did not demand her return. Nonetheless, her husband's family continues to call and ask that she return. Her sister answers the phone. H.'s husband has threatened to rape her sister and to get his friends to rape her sister. He used to come to her family's home and threaten entire family. Strange men also used to gather around the house and threaten the women. H.'s sister confirms the threatening calls. The sister describes him as "a dangerous man, a playboy type," who had raped other girls before. She too has been followed and never leaves home unless accompanied by a male relative.

H. says that this incident has completely changed her life. She is afraid to go anywhere by herself. A male relative takes her everywhere by car. She stays with different relatives so as to make it difficult to follow her. She wants her freedom back. She wants a divorce and she wants her Christian identity papers back. She has no desire to prosecute the husband; she also knows that it will not amount to much. "I just want to finish this part of my life," she tells us. "I want to close this door forever."

H. told us that one of her friends experienced a similar incident. She said that one friend was approached and harassed by a boy who asked her to leave her family and her life to marry him. The friend resisted.

H.'s father is dead. The rest of the family is supportive, but she has a lingering sense of shame.

Case 2: M.

Abducted at age 17, now age 22 6th of October City, Egypt

M. lives with her parents an hour's drive from the center of the city in a well-kept middle class neighborhood.

We met with M. and her mother. M. is a pretty young woman who is an art teacher at a nursery school. Her mother has a quiet, natural dignity about her. They offered us tea.

M. is 22 now. She was 17 when she was abducted.

She claims that she was never a particularly religious girl. In school she was part of a group of friends that included both Christians and Muslims. She had a part-time job in a kindergarten.

An attractive young Muslim boy named Faramahwi was part of the same group of friends. Faramahwi appeared to be a nominal Muslim and they began to develop a friendship. They talked on the phone, sometimes they saw each other in the context of the group and

sometimes they spoke alone after school. He seemed to genuinely like her. They never talked of marriage. He was 22, five years her elder.

At that time, M. and her family were living in an apartment in a different part of town; the downstairs neighbors were from Qatar. M. developed a friendship with the daughter of the household, May, a young woman who was her own age. M. became a frequent visitor to the household. The family consisted of the mother, in her 50's, and two sons. No one in the family worked. The mother seemed to be rich and owned other flats in the city.

May joined M.'s group of friends. May noted M.'s friendship with Faramahwi and encouraged it. M. told May that she wanted to focus on her studies and to become a professional woman. May suggested that Faramahwi was in love with her, but M. said that she did not want that kind of relationship. May told her that it was wrong for her to treat Faramahwi casually since he had such strong feelings for her.

Over the summer, the group did not get together and the different members communicated by phone. Soon, Faramawhi started to visit M. at her home. He often waited for her but she never felt stalked. She tells us that because she was young, she did not think that his behavior was suspicious. She started to feel sorry for him. His parents were separated and mother was very poor while his father was very rich. His father had been an intelligence officer.

One day he called her saying that he was downstairs and suggested they go somewhere to get a drink as two friends. When they went out, M. said that they should not talk about love. She was too young for such feelings. Feelings will change, she told him. Faramahwi listened to her. They finished the meal and went their separate ways. She felt embarrassed. Had she made up the whole thing about his being in love with her?

After her exams, she was hospitalized for a bump on her head. Faramahwi visited her twice in the hospital and also at home. She started to go out with him and began to feel something special. He took her to expensive places. He started sweet talking her. He told her that he loved her. She told him that she did not share his feelings. Faramahwi said he was happy to carry on the way they were, he would eventually convince her to love him. When school resumed the group continued to meet as before. She never suspected that May had known Faramahwi before.

She became closer friends with May, whose father had died in Qatar. May's mother started to talk to her about love and about getting married.

During that time, M.'s behavior began to change. Her mother said that her daughter became agitated and had screaming fits; her pupils were also dilated. They both say now that M. was being drugged – it is the only way to account for the extreme behavior changes. But at the time, her mother's protective attitude influenced M.'s feelings towards her parents. She felt that they were trying to restrict her.

The abduction occurred on November 18, 2005.

The mother and the daughter have different accounts of the story. There are some similarities.

In M.'s version, as she was leaving the flat to visit another friend, she ran into May who offered her a cold drink. M. drank some mango juice and noted open packets of medication on the table but did not think anything of it. M. soon said she had a terrible headache and asked to lie down. Instead, May took her by the hand, led her downstairs to a waiting car, and drove off with her to an apartment. M. did not remember what the area looked like but she did remember the apartment. There were two girls in the apartment. She had seen one of them at May's house. They were sitting in the lounge. There was a bathroom, a bedroom, and kitchen. The place was very quiet.

She stayed there for several days, remaining in a drugged state. She was let outside by a veiled woman. Because of her drugged state and because she was wearing a long veil, she lost her balance and fell. The scars on her hands are still visible. She was put into a car and after a long drive she was brought to a luxurious building with large crystal chandeliers, rich furniture and gold fixtures in all the rooms. She has no memory of how long she stayed there – she did not remember the passing of time, but we know that she was gone from November 18, 2005, to March 21, 2006. She remembers that she ate barbecued pigeons. She drank a lot of juice, including mango juice and orange juice. There were two other girls with her in her room. They were all the same age.

An older veiled woman cared for them. There were many girls and boys at this location. All day long, they studied the Koran. Their guardian, the veiled woman, came to them everyday, took off her veil, and taught them the Koran. Occasionally they were taken by minibus to a mosque. She was fed one meal a day. There was no sexual abuse.

At the end of March things changed. She was sick one day and did not eat or drink. She started to feel more aware and began questioning what she was doing there. She asked her guardian to play a certain tape of the Koran, it was about Paradise. She wanted to know if she was going to Paradise. She said, "I want my family to go to Paradise." The woman was surprised because this was the first time that M. has mentioned family, and began asking questions, "Where is your family?" M. began remembering that she had a family.

The woman fetched her husband and asked M. to repeat what she had said. M. said that she wanted to go back to her family and the guardian offered to take her. The next morning she was asked if she wanted to take her clothes with her. She drank tea with milk and was taken by car. The road was long. M. believes that she was in an Egyptian town known as 6th of October City. She realized that she had been there before. She was dropped off in front of her flat with a bag, containing 2 abeyas (when she was dropped off she was wearing Muslim dress), some baby clothes and some crafts with Koranic verses.

Because her parents had moved after her abduction, her captors took some time locating her new residence. She realized that she was home when she saw her mother.

The mother has a slightly different version of the story. The building guardian came and got M., saying that her friend wanted to show her something. There was a physical argument

and M. started to argue with May. When the mother looked over the balcony, she saw M. being pushed into a car.

The mother says that they were watched during the time of the abduction. After M. came home, the family was harassed by the former boyfriend until he finally lost interest. The family of M.'s current fiancé will not allow them to get married because of her mysterious disappearance. Life cannot be normal. M.'s mother wants to move and she asked about asylum.

Case 3: Mrs. W.

Daughter abducted 3 years ago, still missing

Mrs. W. is the mother of a young woman who was abducted in 2006 during Ramadan (September 23 – October 22). The daughter went shopping and did not return. The family was able to identify the abductor through phone messages left on the daughter's cell phone. The family reported the incident to the police; the young man was arrested but released soon after and no charges were filed. The mother went to her church for help but received none. She received a few telephone calls from her daughter soon 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 help, she will die. She has actively publicized her daughter's disappearance but to this date, nothing is known about her whereabouts.

Case 4: N.

**Abducted at age 20, now age 31
Cairo, Egypt**

N. comes from a poor family. Since a young age, N. has worked as a servant and maid. She has two sisters and considers herself to be a devout Christian with no interest in Islam. Her older sister married a Muslim man and converted to Islam. This caused many problems at home. Her younger sister, Nadia, was engaged to a Christian man but disappeared with a Muslim. N. told us that Nadia chose not to return home because she had children but does remain in contact with her family to this day. N. assumes that her sister will not leave because of her children.

Following Nadia's disappearance, the family pressured N. to marry Nadia's fiancé. Her mother said that an "evil spirit" had taken possession of N. because of her resistance. The mother wanted an exorcism of N. but they were a poor family and could not afford such a procedure.

In 1997, N. was about twenty years old. She and her mother went to see Nadia to seek Nadia's help for release from the evil spirits. Nadia was the only one who understood the pressure on N. N.'s parents would take her to people she did not know and leave her with the strangers while they pressured her to marry Nadia's former fiancé. Her parents kept telling her, "No one will marry you because your sister has converted to Islam. Take this deal; it is the best one you will have."

N. felt that she was unwanted in her own home while she kept refusing the fiancé. At that time, she worked in the office of a children's doctor as a maid. The owner of the building was a Muslim woman who had made pilgrimage to Mecca. She befriended N. and learned of the family problems. N. appreciated the attention, grew to like the landlady and felt as if she could confide in her. The landlady started to talk about Islam – what a wonderful religion it was and how good she felt about being a Muslim.

N. said she reached a point where she became claustrophobic from pressure of her family and her landlady. She felt as if she had no place to turn. She went to visit her sister Nadia, seeking a place to rest. Her sister told her, if you want to stay here, you have to convert and wear the full veil. N. refused.

Her landlady invited N. to stay at her home, reassuring her that the boys would remain on the other side of the house. N. would be safe. In the landlady's absence, her daughter started to change N.'s ID without her knowledge, preparing for her conversion. N.'s Christian ID was taken and switched without her consent. She went to the Attorney General of the village who promised protection of her family of origin if she were to convert. He offered her money but N. does not remember the amount. Although she came from a poor family she refused the money. The Attorney General said it was too late to help her since her ID had already been changed. To make N. happy, one of the landlady's nephews offered to take her to Cairo for a visit. After some sightseeing, they went to Al-Azhar, the center of highest Islamic authority in Egypt, where N. was introduced to a senior clergy member. He asked her name, and she replied with her Christian name. He got angry and asked the nephew how he could allow such behavior. He ordered that the tattoo be removed and issued her a new identification card with a Muslim name.

Two days later, she was taken to a plastic surgeon who removed the tattoo by cutting it out and sewing the skin back together. She began to wear the Hijab and to look for a job.

Her landlady's daughter started to treat her badly and tried to persuade her to marry a man that she did not want to marry. She refused the man and the mistreatment continued. During Ramadan, she refused to fast. She ran away but was captured and returned to her the home of her landlady who had found another husband for her. N. went to Alexandria for the official engagement ceremony. She started to get second thoughts and returned home but was soon picked up and taken to the State Security police. The police told her that, if she did not marry this man, she would be punished. In very vulgar language she was told her punishment would include rape.

At that time, there were still counseling sessions for young women who were thinking of converting. She met with her parish priest and a monk from a monastery near the Red Sea. N. was very impressed with the monk. "He restored my confidence in myself," she said. She tells us that at that moment she knew for certain that Jesus would never leave her. The monk gave her his telephone number and told her to call him anytime. The head of the State Security police was there and heard the conversation. He told N., "If you ever think of going back, you have no idea of what we will do to you."

When she went back to her landlady's house, she was beaten from which her legs are scarred to this day. She was married officially to a Muslim man. She was still a virgin.

One day, while left alone, she went to a church to think. She explained her situation to some of the deacons who called a taxi for her. She went to see her cousin and from there, they took her to a monastery in Fayoum. It was far from her village, and therefore a safe place.

The sister in charge of women in similar circumstances was very cruel. N. was beaten, left with only a gown to wear and no personal toiletries or hygienic products. The sister said she did not believe she lived so long in a Muslim family while still remaining a virgin. N. was locked in a room alone. She learned that in her home town the state police had arrested her mother and her sister. She spoke to numerous representatives of the foreign press about her story, but nothing of her story was ever published.

When the Bishop of Beni Suit got news of the mother's imprisonment, he sent a special car for N. N. went to the Bishop, who obtained a lawyer for her, but N. rejected the services of this lawyer. She went to see the Attorney General and was detained for 4 days. She and her mother were eventually released but faced considerable harassment (psychological and emotional, but not physical). She wanted to return to her Christian faith and she received threats from the Muslims.

Eventually, N. married a Christian man through the church, but the marriage is not recognized under civil law. The Egyptian Government still regards N. officially as a Muslim woman. She and her husband, a plumber, have three children. For security purposes, she can no longer live in her home town. It is hard for her husband to find work because her story is known. She still works as a maid. She is sexually harassed in many places. She is currently employed in the law offices of a sympathetic Christian attorney as a cleaning lady. The attorney has offered to take on her case. Her children do not know what happened to her. She is afraid to tell them out of fear of what they will think of her. She tells us, "I need to leave this country because no matter where I live, the story will always find its way to my children."

Case 5: R.

Abducted at age 17, now age 22 Al-Fayoum, Egypt

R. was abducted October 11, 2005. She had lived in the same neighborhood all of her life and knew all the neighbors. She was especially good friends with the daughter of a neighboring Muslim family, Sarah. They practically grew up together and were like sisters, inseparable. Sarah had an admirer named Wali, a classmate, who called her all the time.

Wali began to call for Sarah on R.'s phone. His calls became so frequent that finally R. told Wali to stop calling her. He became very angry. "You will regret telling me not to call you," he said in a threatening voice. She stopped seeing Sara after that. This happened in 2004.

After a year and a half, she received a call from Wali's telephone number. The voice was different and polite. A young man introduced himself as Amir, and said that he was an admirer of hers. He also knew everything about her. He wanted to meet her in a church. When R. said that she did not usually meet people she did not know, he replied that he knew she was on her way to church and that he would wait for her outside. There, he introduced

himself and asked R.'s mother for her hand in marriage. The mother replied that it was not so simple. Amir went to their flat the next day to speak to R.'s father.

Amir told R.'s father that he wanted nothing from the family except for their daughter's hand in marriage. He had seen her in the street and instantly felt that she would be a perfect wife for him. R.'s father did not want them to date until he met the boy's parents. Amir kept giving excuses: his mother was sick and his father was out of town. Finally, he told them that his father died. R.'s parents wanted to go as a family to pay respects but Amir said that this would not be necessary since his home was far away. Later that week, Amir's sister contacted them and came to meet R. R. was engaged and ready to be married. She said she was not deeply in love, but that Amir seemed like a decent person.

Amir's sister Christina asked R. to go shopping with them. R.'s mother initially opposed the idea but finally relented when the girls told her they would not go far. Christina offered to find a taxi and returned saying she had found one quickly. In retrospect, R. says that this was odd since they lived in a neighborhood in which it was usually difficult to find taxis. Christina gave directions to the taxi driver to a close-by shopping area. It was a warm day and Christina offered R. some juice. R. declined but Christina insisted and drank it, remembering that the bottle was already opened. By the time she finished her juice, she felt quite dizzy.

The taxi took a detour onto a dirt road and stopped in an isolated area. The driver said that there was something wrong with the car and he needed to check. Christina got out as well. A van pulled up full of people and some came over to get her. Amir was one of them.

R. could not talk, even though she wanted to ask many questions. They began to beat her and she fainted. When she woke up, she was in bed surrounded by many different strange men. "Amir" told her that he was in reality Wali, whom she had dismissed so abruptly in the past and he reminded her of his threat. He then announced that she was going to be married to a Muslim man.

She wanted to get out of the room but a woman blocked the door. She was locked in the room without her purse or her phone. This was the period of Ramadan, when under Islamic Law it is not possible to marry. Amir insisted on a conversion immediately. She was taken to the religious authorities where five other girls were waiting. All of them were Christians preparing to marry Muslims.

The papers were signed and the conversion was complete. R. was given the Muslim name of Fatimah. She refused to say the proclamation of faith and was beaten.

She was married to another man she had never met, Mahmoud. When she refused to have sex with him, the family held her down while he raped her. She began bleeding profusely.

She stayed with him for 9 months and was beaten every day. The Coptic cross which was tattooed on her wrist was burned off with acid and she still has scars. R. was forced to cover herself completely when she left her home and was called Fatima by the family members. Her veil was black.

R. pretended to observe the Muslim rituals and prayers, but it was just a pretense for her. As a result of the rape and constant beatings, she became physically ill. When her husband went to work, he locked her in the house, alone, without a phone. She was never allowed to leave by herself. On the day of her escape, she told her in-laws that she was going to pray in the mosque but instead she called her mother and said she wanted to come home. She took a taxi to her parents' house. Her mother took her to a Convent outside of Cairo in Al-Fayoum. It was a terrible experience. The nuns did not believe that she tried to resist conversion. She was humiliated and beaten. There were several girls there who had experiences similar to hers but they were all kept apart and not allowed to speak.

R. is trying to find work. She still has her Christian identification card since she did not surrender it and she wants an official divorce. She is unable to have children as a result of the rape.

Case 6: R.

**Abducted at age 26, now age 27
Alexandria, Egypt**

R. was in an unhappy marriage to a Christian man. She met Ahmed and they became friends. When she told him her story and how unhappy she was, he offered to marry her. The situation between R. and her husband worsened to the extent that she left her husband and took the children to her brother's house. She met with Ahmed who encouraged her to leave the children with her brother and to come with him. Ahmed came to get her with his sister and mother. They took her to Helwen (a close neighborhood) and locked her up alone. She was frightened and tried to escape but the family stopped her and threatened her. "We will kill you if you escape," they said. They moved her from one location to another until May 13, 2007 when she was taken to Al-Azhar for her conversion. Ahmed wanted to marry her but the cleric said she had to divorce her husband. In the interim, R. learned that he was a drug dealer. R. agreed to write a marriage contract dated August 23, four months away, to buy herself time and began to plot her escape.

On 19th of August, R. called her father and told him where she was; he came to pick her up. Just at that time, Ahmed and his family arrived and told her father that she had converted and that they would marry. The father began to talk to Ahmed, giving him some money to buy food. When Ahmed was gone, he took his daughter home in a taxi. As they were driving off, Ahmed tried to stop them.

Ahmed fell; they were stopped by a traffic policeman who accused the taxi driver of trying to murder someone. They were all taken to a police station where the father explained the story and everyone returned to their respective homes. R. went to Alexandria and sought out a priest who witnessed the marks on her body from being tied up and beaten. The case is not yet solved and R. remains in hiding.

Case 7: S.

**Disappeared at age 19, now age 19
Shobra, Egypt**

S. was born in 1989. At the time of her disappearance, she was unmarried and in her first year of law school. She lived in Shobra, one of the largest districts of Cairo.

S. disappeared and was converted on January 15, 2008 in Al-Azhar, Egypt's institution of highest Islamic authority. She was married to Ahmed Mohamed Falim on January 19, 2008, four days after her disappearance and conversion.

S. met Ahmed over the internet and they soon established more direct communication. He called frequently and sent her numerous text messages with love notes. His persistence and promises of love helped persuade her to go to Al-Azhar on January 15th, the day of her disappearance. On the 19th of January, S. was officially married. Ahmed then became physically and mentally abusive to her. On May 19th, she ran away to Alexandria. She has filed charges against Ahmed claiming physical abuse. She is asking for a divorce and the return of her Christian identity. Her case had not yet been heard at the writing of this report.

Case 8: A.

**Disappeared at age 19, now age 23
Alexandria, Egypt**

A., a young, illiterate Coptic woman, used to work in shops owned by Kassim who began to court her. A marriage contract was drafted dated July 27. However, Kassim was already married and he had to obtain a divorce. Every morning, A. left to spend the day with her new husband. Kassim's wife found out and went to A.'s family to tell them what was going on.

A. disappeared the 27th of July 2005, the same day her marriage contract was drafted with Kassim. Her father had filed a missing persons report accusing Kassim of abduction. She refused to return to her parents' home and went to live with Kassim and his first wife. In August 2005, A. went to Al-Azhar, the center of Islamic authority in Egypt, to convert. She was formally married in 2006 and received a Muslim identity card as well as a Muslim name. She continued to live with her husband but he became progressively more abusive, refusing to let her out alone. The first wife also began to mistreat her. A. informed her husband she could no longer life like this and wanted a divorce. A. returned to her family and was divorced in 2008. She is requesting the return of her Christian identity.

Case 9: N.

**Disappeared at age 22, now age 25
Alexandria, Egypt**

N. was engaged to a young Christian man whom she did not love. Her parents insisted on this marriage. She was in love with another boy and wanted to marry him but his financial situation was poor and the parents refused. N. had a Muslim girlfriend who convinced her to leave home for a while and live with her. She introduced N. to some Islamic clergymen

who began to teach her about Islam and who advised her to live as a Muslim for the rest of her life. If she returned to Christianity, they told her, she would be an apostate and would deserve to die.

On October 22 2005, N. resigned her job. N. was taken to the home of a Muslim woman where she stayed for a few days, and then finally she was taken to al Amraya, a district of Alexandria, Egypt.

N. was told not to talk to anyone except police officers. When she met with police officers, she told them that she wanted to convert to Islam and when asked if there were love involved, she said no. N. was told to return in one week. She did, without her identity card, saying she lost it. She was sent to Al-Azhar to convert while a police officer made arrangements for a duplicate identity card. He made it easy for N. because he cared for her and wanted to marry her himself. She was provided with the duplicate ID and was converted. She married the police officer and went away for a week's honeymoon.

Upon her return, N. lived in a home with a chaperone, another Christian girl who had converted. A cleric came every day to provide them with religious instruction.

She was fully veiled and not allowed to leave without a chaperone. She began to feel stifled and one day she was able to escape while going shopping. She took off her veils and called someone from the church to come and get her. Because a State Security police officer is involved, the case is very difficult.

Case 10: L.

**Disappeared at age 26, now age 28
Alexandria, Egypt**

L., an accounting student, fell in love with her neighbor, Ahmed, who had persistently wooed her. Ahmed said that he would convert to Christianity and that he would take her to the Netherlands where he was working. Although the neighbors questioned his intention to convert, the couple was secretly married in a civil ceremony on February 15th 2006. L. disappeared on April 3, 2006.

When L.'s family started to look for her, they were told that she had married Ahmed and that she would be going to the Netherlands. L. soon changed her mind and began to ask her husband to let her return home.

Ahmed took L. to her aunt's home for a short visit. On July 16, Ahmed came to pick her up. She was pregnant. He forced her to have an abortion and took her home on July 18. He divorced her through a lawyer and she went back to her family.

Case 11: P.

**Disappeared at age 21, now age 23
Alexandria, Egypt**

P. disappeared on January 12, 2006. She converted to Islam on January 17, 2006 in Alexandria and has not returned home. P.'s family knows that she is in Alexandria. The

father has requested that the State Security police contact her on the family's behalf but the police deny any knowledge of the case.

Case 12: N.

**Disappeared at age 20, now age 23
Alexandria, Egypt**

On February 13, 2005, after a visit to her local priest, N. returned home and informed her parents that she had decided to become a nun. On February 14, 2005, she took the train to meet with her confessor and has not been seen since. On February 22, the State Security service informed a priest who was not previously involved in this affair that N. Maher had converted to Islam.

On February 28, a counseling session was scheduled with N. and two priests. N. arrived fully veiled. She was unable to respond to any questions and appeared to be under the influence of drugs. Officers from the State Security police were present at that interview. Another religious counseling session was scheduled for March 10 but N. never showed up. The family has not seen their daughter for the past 3 years; they have no idea of her whereabouts. The police will not give any information to the family.

Case 13: H.

**Disappeared at age 17, now age 21, still missing
Cairo, Egypt**

Since H. was 13, she was the object of the attentions of Mustafa Ahmed Mohamed, a mechanic, whose work was located across the road from H.'s home. On April 6, 2004, H. went to visit her Math tutor and never returned home. Later, it was discovered that some of her mother's jewelry was missing. Her parents reported her disappearance and named the mechanic. The police contacted this man who admitted that he had H. and that they would be getting married. He also indicated that H. had converted to Islam. At that time, H. was under 18 years of age. The police located H. and asked her parents to return the next day to collect their daughter.

On April 7, the parents went, as directed, to the police station. To their surprise, they were told that there was no one there who could help them with their particular case. Towards midnight, H. arrived in a police car, fully veiled; only her eyes were showing. She was in the company of Sheikh Osama and the mechanic. Police took a written statement from the parents declaring that they would not hurt H. and that she be allowed to wear her veil since she had converted to Islam. H. was released to her parents. She was visibly under the influence of some kind of medication that made her drowsy and incoherent. When the parents asked the police why she was drugged or medicated, they were told that she had been very upset and needed sedation. The police told the parents that they were forbidden to have their daughter examined by a doctor.

The following morning, the parents decided to leave Cairo and move to Alexandria where they rented a flat. Mustafa followed them there. On April 8, H. disappeared again without speaking to her parents. The only evidence they had was a picture of her wrist which had

been tattooed with a Coptic cross. It had been burned off with acid and only ugly scars remained.

H. was seen twice with her husband, veiled and pregnant. The family has not heard from her since March 2005 and the police will not help the family.

Case 14: A.

Mentally disabled

Abducted at age 19, now age 27

Cairo, Egypt

At the age of 19, A., mentally disabled, was kidnapped, converted and adopted by a Muslim in Cairo. Al-Azhar accepted her conversion despite her impaired mental status and her age. She was returned to her father after a long battle with the police. The Church accepted her as a Christian; however she retains her Muslim ID card. Her case was heard on January 1, 2003. There are few details about this case since A. has not been able to communicate anything about her treatment. A.'s family does not know if she has been raped or not. Her parents refused to take her to a doctor for an examination upon her return.

Case 15: J.

Abducted at age 19, now age 23

Cairo, Egypt

On April 4, 2002 J. was abducted by a group of men in a car. She was raped by her abductor with the help of his mother and sister, who was J.'s classmate. J. was forced to convert to Islam and was married on April 20, 2002 in Al-Azhar, the center of Islamic authority in Egypt. She lived with her in-laws for 4 months in a locked room and was not allowed outside the flat. At the end of August, she became very ill and was admitted to Al Qaser El Aini Hospital where she managed to contact her father, Fayiz Faris. After a three week stay in the hospital, her father was able to bring her home. As a result of the abduction and the rape, J. experiences severe depression. Her case was heard on January 1, 2002. Her divorce was granted, but her Christian identity card was not returned to her. J. remains on medication to this day and lives with her parents.

Case 16: H.

Disappeared at age 20, now age 24

Cairo, Egypt

H. Ayad is a poor, uneducated woman and, at the time of the interview, was engaged to be married. Essam is a Muslim friend of H.'s father who is old enough to be H.'s father. He is married and has children of his own. He led H. to believe that he would look after her and marry her. He instructed her to take her mother's gold and to leave the house early in the morning of December 2004. H. disappeared for 11 days. During that time, Essam took her to El Zawia El Hamra police station to sign a report indicating her intention to convert. After they left the police station, Essam took H. to Al-Azhar, Egypt's center of Islamic authority, to officially convert. After H. had converted to Islam and Essam had married her, the police notified the family. The priest and her family managed to convince H. to return

home before any changes in her identity papers took place. She is not living in the same town anymore for safety reasons.

Case 17: M.

**Disappeared at age 15, now age 30
El Menya, Egypt**

M. was befriended by a Muslim girl who went to school with her. On May 28, 1995, M. disappeared just prior to her 16th birthday. Her Muslim friend had promised to introduce her to boys and to show her a good time. The friend took M. on a train to Cairo where M. was introduced to a Muslim woman who promised to look after her as her own daughter. M. was then taken to a city called Zagazik in the Delta Region sixty kilometers north. Several days later, M. was raped by the son. She was taken to a Dr. Zidan who surgically removed the Coptic cross tattooed on her wrist and who also started to teach her about Islam. Later in July, M. was taken to a lawyer, Gouda Mohamed Ali, who took her to Al-Azhar where she converted to Islam. When an ID was needed for the conversion, she was taken back to Cairo for a duplicate of her Christian ID. Since she was not 16, the lawyer testified that he had permission from her father to act as power of attorney (the documents he produced were false). She was later married to her rapist and lived with her parents-in-law. There was never any contact from Al-Azhar or the police notifying the parents of her intent to convert.

M. stayed with her husband for two years. When she turned 18, he divorced her and kicked her out of the house. With nowhere to go, she sought help from the lawyer, Mohamed Ali, who took her into his employ and married her according to a contract. He forced her to veil herself when she left the house. M. was too frightened to return to her family, not aware of the fact that they had been searching for her. Mohamed Ali took M. to Alexandria where he left her with one of his friends who prostituted her to lawyers and doctors and used her to traffic drugs. He also provided her with drugs, forcing her to become addicted. M. eventually became pregnant and gave birth to a baby boy in 2001.

The father of the child married her and moved to Cairo where no one knew either her or him. He abused her both physically and psychologically. In 2004, M. decided that it was time to return to Christianity and to ask her parents for forgiveness. Her past nine years had been like “time spent in Hell.”

She went to a church near her home and requested to see the parish priest. She told him about the past nine years. The priest said that she needed to make a choice. She could remain with her son, who was named Mohamed, or return to her family and church. The priest accepted her back into the church and notified Father Marcos Ameal, her parish priest in Samalout, who in turn notified her family. She left her husband.

She is not able to restore her Christian identity. She is constantly followed by the father of her child, and is now living under a different name in another city. M. fears for her son and finds it hard to pick up the pieces of her life.

Case 18: N.

**Abducted at age 26, now age 33
Cairo, Egypt**

N.'s life is haunted by the trauma that resulted from her trying to save the life of her five-year-old daughter from dying.

N. had been married when she was 12 to a man who was 26 years old. By the age of 30, she had five children ranging in age from 5 to 17 years of age. In early 2001, N.'s youngest daughter, Miriam, who was five years old at the time, was diagnosed with severe anemia that required monthly blood transfusions.

N. was told that she needed to buy the blood for her daughter's transfusions. N.'s husband was unemployed and unable to put food on the table, let alone pay for blood. The doctor who attended Miriam told N. to take the girl to the mosque across the street and speak with the imam who would be able to help her. N. did as she was told. The imam offered food to her and her daughter and provided them with a bag of blood. The imam sent a man to accompany N. to the hospital to help her during the procedures. Shabaan, a married man with two children, accompanied N. on this first and all subsequent visits.

In August 2001, Shabaan told twenty six year old N. that he loved her and he would like to marry her and take care of her children. He asked her to return to her house, get her children and come back to him. N. refused and wanted to go home. He continued to drive, but she realized that he was not taking her home but to Cairo. They arrived at Al-Azhar where she was forced to convert to Islam. Later in the evening, she was driven to Al Zawai Al Hamra police station where her documents were changed. The conversion and change of documents took about five hours. They were driven back to El Menya and placed in a "juristic association". The association is an Islamic center funded by the government and which provides free services, including medical consultation, medicine, a social worker and a "Madrasa", an Islamic school for children. A separate part of the building is kept locked, and is used to house those who were forced to convert to Islam. These converts are kept under surveillance. They are taught the Koran twice a day. No one enters that part of the building apart from the veiled women who teach the converts.

Arriving at 4 in the afternoon, N. was given a drink that put her to sleep. She received a similar drink every morning from the president of the Center, Mr. Mohamed Abd El Zaher, who is also a lawyer. N. remembers that there were many women in the center, usually staying two to a room. She was in a room alone with her daughter.

Every day after her drink, she would receive instruction in the Koran and Islamic prayers by veiled women. She and her daughter were kept there as prisoners for over three months. On the 10th of November, during the period of Ramadan, the president, Mr. Mohamed El Zaher, traveled to Saudi Arabia for a few weeks. For the first time in three months, she did not receive her daily drink and she experienced withdrawal symptoms. Once her head cleared, she began asking questions of everyone she could talk with but received no answers. One evening she asked a guard if he could take her daughter to the shop across the road to buy her some sweets to quiet her, since she was crying. The guard did so and while he was

away, N. used his phone to call her brother's wife. N. gave her clues as to where the building was located and told her that she would not be allowed in as a Christian.

Her courageous sister-in-law visited N. every day, fully veiled, and told the guard that she was sent from the mosque where N. used to get blood for her daughter to see how she was doing. During the celebration time at the end of Ramadan, when the guards were too busy to observe what was happening, the sister-in-law took N. and her daughter out of the center and to the residence of the bishop, where N. told her story. The bishop had to act on the evidence he heard from N. Her family had reported her missing, along with her daughter, but the police did not try to locate them. They refused to enter the center, saying that it belonged to Al-Azhar and it was out of the question for them to conduct a search there. N. stayed at the residence of the bishop for several days and was subsequently returned to her family. An hour after her return, she was arrested by the State Security police and was taken to the local police station where she was interrogated throughout the night. She was beaten and abused both physically and psychologically. A police officer slapped her across her face and broke three of her teeth. N. was placed in a tiled room with ten inches of water of the floor and few clothes to protect her body. The temperature outside was very cold (about 6 degrees centigrade). She was not allowed to use the toilet and was told to use a bucket, which she could not do while a man was watching. She contracted a urinary tract infection as a result of this mistreatment. She was left in the water for two days. On the third day, the police offered her money, clothes and men, among other inducements if she were to return to Islam. She refused. During the time she was incarcerated, the bishop worried about her children because Shabaan was trying to get custody of all five (as they were all under age) as the mother N. was now Muslim and the children should be living with a Muslim family.

The church took the five children to Alexandria in early December 2001. There, they attended schools for two years. N. was released after four days with broken teeth, a urinary tract infection and permanent psychological damage. N. returned to Christianity the day she left the center. Her Christian ID was never returned. She and her family live off charity from the church and move from house to house fearing that their children will be kidnapped.

Case 19: T.

Abduction and forced conversion in 2004

Geeza, Egypt

**Others involved: Tharwat (husband); L. (daughter, age 19);
R. (daughter, 16); M. (daughter, 12) and Y. (daughter, 9)**

Hany Mohamed Sayed Seleem was introduced to T.'s family by a neighbor who claimed that he wanted to learn about Christianity. The family was reluctant to share information on Christianity with him, but at the same time they wanted to help him, so T. sent a Bible to him through the family that had made the initial introduction. Soon after, the police came to the home of the family and accused them of attempting to convert a Muslim man. On November 2, 2004, the police took T. to the police station, documented her story and asked her to sign a statement. T. was given a blank page to sign and, when T. refused, she was slapped.

Several days later, T. was summoned to the office of the State Security police where she was informed that her conversion to Islam was complete and that she now needed to go to Al-Azhar, the center of Egypt's Islamic authority. T. replied that she did not apply to convert to Islam and that she wanted to remain a Christian. T. was threatened. She was told that if she did not convert, she would be put in prison and her daughters would be taken away from her. She was told she would never see them again. Under such duress, she completed the conversion process on November 24, 2004.

T. received money through Essam Harab, an official at the Faisal Islamic Bank, as well as a new and well-furnished apartment. The next step was for the girls to convert to Islam and the mother signed on their behalf.

After the conversions were celebrated, T. was sent home with the two younger daughters. L. and R. were detained against their will in Al-Azhar. They were kept there for four days, from November 24 through November 28 2004. During their four days in Al-Azhar, the girls were subjected to instruction in Islamic prayers, the Koran and other aspects of Muslim life. They met an actor, Ahmed Maher, who promised L. that, if she converted to Islam, he would help her to be a star. The head of Al-Azhar, Sheik Mohamed Sayed Tantawy, spent two hours with the girls to convince them to convert to Islam. He also tried to confuse them about their Christian beliefs.

The two girls were taken to the police station in the 6th of October district after their stay in Al-Azhar to complete the conversion process and obtain new identity cards. They were at the police station for four hours during which time the police officers tried to no avail to convince them of the merits of Islam.

T. was pictured wearing a full veil when she went to the State Security office to sign the conversion papers for her daughters as well as herself on November 29.

The flat that T. and her daughters lived in was monitored. Residents were not allowed to leave without the permission of the police. M., the youngest, wanted to change schools so that she would not have to travel so far every day. On December 9, T., L. and M. left the flat to locate a new school for M. Once out of the flat, L. received a call on the cell phone provided by the State Security police asking what the family was doing outside without permission. L. told them what they were doing. On the way home from meeting with the director of M.'s new school, a large black four-wheel drive vehicle hit T. and two of the girls. T. and her 12 year old daughter M. were killed. L. managed to see part of the vehicle's registration number. Another driver was arrested for no reason because he happened to be at the scene at the same time. He said that he saw the accident and could partially confirm the vehicle registration. But since there was discrepancy between what he saw and what L. saw, the testimonies were ruled invalid.

L. accuses Hany Mohamed Seleem of killing her mother and her little sister. Hany had threatened the mother once before with murder if she thought of going back on her conversion. Hana also pressured other acquaintances to call T. and threaten her.

As a result of T.'s death, the government would get custody of the girls since they were Muslims and had no legal right to live with a Christian father. The parish priest went to

claim T. and M.'s bodies since they should be buried according to Christian rites. He was refused, and the bodies were buried according to Muslim tradition.

On the 11th of December, L. was summoned to the State Security office in 6th of October City where she was interviewed by a high-ranking officer, Medhat Allam, along with another officer, Mohamed Sharshar. They both pressured her to return to Islam and she refused, asking the police to call her father so that she could go home. The police referred the matter to the District Attorney who asked for the father to bring the two remaining girls to him.

The death certificates of both T. and M. list them as Muslims. M.'s age was recorded as 21 and not 12.

The surviving daughters, L. and R., are living with their father but are not sure what their future will be. They do not know if they will be further pursued and pressured to convert to Islam.

Case 20: S.

**Disappeared at age 17, now age 27
Sanaboo-Diyrout, Upper Egypt**

S., a seventeen-year-old high school student, disappeared on July 1, 1998.

She was raped in the back of a van on the way to her abductor's home. Her parents spent three days searching for her and on July 3, 1998 they reported her disappearance to the police. Very little was done to find the seventeen year old and the police responded with the usual comment that she must have run off with a young man. She was kept sedated until her conversion and marriage were completed. On July 11, S. converted to Islam and on July 17 she was married to a Muslim boy who took her to Cairo, far away from her parents and family. S. comes from a village approximately 750 kilometers from Cairo; according to her parents, she had never been on a train any further than Asuit, which is 20 minutes away. Her parents knew that she was taken to Al Gamalia, a suburb in Cairo, but had no further information as to her location. They did not hear from her for three years.

In Cairo, she worked as a servant to the first wife of the man who abducted her. She was paid nothing for her services and was given a very small amount of money to feed her children. She and her children were not allowed to eat with the rest of the household. They slept in a basement where there were no windows, no electricity and no ventilation.

After five years of an abusive marriage to her Muslim husband, S. managed to save enough money from the food allowance she was given each week and fled Cairo with her three young sons. She returned to her parents' home, but they were afraid of the State Security police. Her father took her to Bishop Thomas who sent her to one of the crisis homes run by the church without telling anyone of her location, including her parents. S. was accepted back into the church and her children were baptized.

Her father was arrested in November 2004, after briefly hiding S. and her children, and was kept in jail for three weeks. During this time he was beaten, offered money, humiliated and threatened by the police to reveal the location of his daughter and her sons, as they were all

Muslims. Harboring them was a crime for which he could be hanged. He was not able to reveal their location, as the only one who knew was Bishop Thomas.

S.'s father fled the country and is now working in an Arab country after paying someone to obtain another identity card. S.'s mother has lived alone since S.'s brothers left with their father, also fearing for their lives. They intend to take their mother out of the country at the earliest possible opportunity.

It was not possible to get an update concerning the status of S. and her sons. The boys are facing problems getting into school, as their identities will be compromised. The only simple way to solve this problem is for S. to return to her husband. The boys and their mother continue to live in an undisclosed location under the protection of the church.

Case 21: M.

**Disappeared at age 20, now age 26, still missing
El Koussa, Egypt**

On March 30, 2003, M. disappeared without any warning. On March 31, the day after her disappearance, her parents reported her missing. The police dismissed the parent's complaint. M. was an only child and she was over 21 when her parents reported her missing. On May 15, 2003, the parish priest in Al Mansa received a call from the State Security police claiming that M. was converting to Islam and that they needed to set up a counseling session with him. He requested a copy of the police report reporting her disappearance, and instead received a copy of her Al-Azhar conversion certificate. It stated that she had already become a Muslim. Arranging a conversation with a priest was a set-up in order to accuse the church of preaching Christianity to a Muslim, and the priest could be arrested. There was no use to hold the session. There has been no news of M. since. She was a loved child and is missed very much. Neither the church nor her parents know where she is, or if she is even alive.

Case 22: M.

**Disappeared at age 26, now age 35, still missing
El Koussa, Egypt**

M. was a primary school teacher. On August 8, 2000, M. left school early and was never seen again. Her father accused Ahmed Hanafy Hussein, who was also a teacher in a school in the same town, of convincing her to run away with him. A police report was filed by her father Gaber Hanna Issa two days after her disappearance.

On August 8, the day after she disappeared, M. married Ahmed Hanafy Hussein in a civil ceremony and fled to Cairo. On August 13, she went to El Darb Al Ahmer police station to declare her intention to convert to Islam. The paper work was completed and she went to Al-Azhar on the same day. She and her husband had children and lived in a town near her parents. For all of this time, four years at the writing of this report, her parents have not been able to see her or the grandchildren. No one has been able to contact her. According to friends who have tried to visit her, she is kept in a locked house, does not work and her husband is the one to take the children to doctor visits or to visit his parents and relatives.

Case 23: W.

**Disappeared at age 18, now age 22, still missing
Cairo, Egypt**

This case contains a letter from her father to Susan Mubarek, Gamal Mubarek, the Minister of the Interior and the Chief Officer of Mubarek's office stating: "Dear Sir/Madam: My daughter, W., was kidnapped on February 2, 2005, by a Muslim boy who lives in the village of Bolak El Dakroor in the outskirts of Cairo. My daughter is only 18 years of age and could harm no one. I beg you to find my daughter, as she is the apple of my eye. Yours truly, Marion Abd El Messeh."

Case 24: N.

**Portuguese/Egyptian National
Disappeared 4 years ago, still missing
6th of October City, Egypt**

N., a pharmacy student at 6th of October University, disappeared on December 18, 2004 after leaving for school. N. has dual Egyptian and Portuguese citizenship. When N. did not return from school, her parents reported her disappearance to the police at the Shobra El Khima station. They also reported the involvement of a fellow student, Ahmed Hamdy. The police called him to the station and he denied any knowledge of N.'s whereabouts. There has been no news of N. Her mother reported her disappearance to the Portuguese embassy in Egypt with no result.

Case 25: N.

**Disappeared at age 17, now age 24
Alexandria, Egypt**

N. Grace, age 17, was kidnapped in Alexandria on September 4, 2001 as she was returning home after a visit to her aunt. Her brother reported her disappearance on September 5. She was forced to convert to Islam and adopted by Al-Dabghly Fayez Fadal, the man who kidnapped her. N.'s father died when she was 7 years old and she was raised by her mother. Their neighbor, a Muslim man old enough to be N.'s father, wanted to take N. and her mother into his home and convert them. When N.'s mother refused, he abducted N., converted her to Islam and formalized his adoption of her. She was returned to her mother seventeen months after her abduction on February 14, 2003 and the case was heard on July 21 2003. Her request to have her Christian identity restored was denied. The Church accepted her back although she remains a Muslim according to official records. N.'s brother pressed charges against Sheik Mahmoud Tantawy as he allowed the conversion of a minor. The case was dismissed on the grounds that one cannot press charges against the leader of Al-Azhar.