

# *Hidden Crimes, Public Deception*

## **The Epidemic of the Disappearance of Coptic Girls and Women in Egypt**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Overview	4
Challenges	4
Methodology	5
Key findings	6
1) Country Profile Egypt	7
1.1. Child- and forced marriage	8
1.2. Sexual violence	10
1.3. Trafficking	12
2) Methods: Abductions and Grooming	12
2.1. Abduction	13
2.2. Grooming (or luring)	14
2.3. Reverse accusations and punishments	15
3) Vulnerability of Coptic women and girls	16
3.1. Invisibility of Copts	16
4) Conclusion	21
4.1. Recommendations	21
5) Recent Cases	24
5.1. Detailed Cases	24
5.2. Minor Cases	27
5.3. Adult Cases	30

Appendix: Interviews	37
❖ Amany	37
❖ Nada	40
❖ Marina	46
❖ Simone	50

## INTRODUCTION

### *Overview*

Just as in previous years, Coptic Solidarity was again made aware of dozens of cases concerning the abduction, forced marriage, and forced religious conversion of Coptic women and girls in Egypt. We have also learned from various sources within Egypt itself, that there have been cases of sexual violence, including rape, against Coptic women and girls without (prior, or forced) marriage. Most of these cases do not garner much media attention, if any. Although there is a growing awareness regarding gender-specific religious persecution (GSRP), the issue of sexual violence, abduction, forced marriage, and forced conversion of women and girls from ethno-religious minorities, including Egyptian Copts, remains underreported.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically with regard to the situation of Coptic women and girls, underreporting is a problem. One important factor is the Egyptian government's denial of these disappearances. Lack of data is another crucial problem because it creates doubt regarding the validity of these cases. Furthermore, we have learned during interviews conducted with relatives of missing Coptic women, that local authorities are often involved in refusing families the right to report cases as well as making threats to those relatives who wish to do so. This negligence will be addressed in chapters one and three of this report.

The faith-based marginalized position of Copts, within Egypt's legal framework and Egyptian society, is often overlooked in reports by non-governmental organisations (NGO), institutions, and policy makers. From the interviews we conducted, it is apparent that the conversion of Coptic girls to Islam, is a strong motivating factor. Reports, policies, and legislation regarding abduction and / or human trafficking in Egypt, focus predominantly on sexual violence alone, without considering the religious motivation. This, the forced conversion (to Islam) that often follows cases of abduction of Coptic women and girls, will be further covered in chapter two.

### *Challenges*

Collecting data has been one of the greatest challenges with regard to abduction, sexual violence, forced marriage, and forced religious conversion of Coptic women and girls. The

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<sup>1</sup> Aid to the Church in Need (ACN). 2021. *"Hear Her Cries: The kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimisation of Christian women and girls."*

lack of data has sometimes caused policy makers, politicians, and non-governmental organisations not to act, due to fear of spreading false or unverified information.

The Egyptian government denies the problem and local authorities often refuse to file a report at the request of families and friends. This denial by the Egyptian government extends beyond the disappearance, sexual violence and, forced marriage and conversion of Coptic women and girls. For example, EuroMed Rights also noted state denial in their report regarding sexual violence, rape threats and sexual insults, by state agents against Egyptian women.<sup>2</sup> Gender-based violence by state agents against women is not only denied by the Egyptian state, but also, according to the EuroMed Rights report, by the Egyptian National Council for Women (NCW).

Regarding Coptic women and girls who were abducted, those victims who do manage to return home, often are too frightened to speak publicly, due to threats made to their own safety and/or that of their relatives. Despite the obstacles, we succeeded in interviewing several close family members of women who disappeared and learned from them about the grooming process that ultimately resulted in their disappearance. We also learned from these interviews how parents and siblings were treated by police officials when they tried to report their missing daughter or sister, which often resulted in (implicit) threats, lack of urgency, and reluctance to file a case report.

### *Methodology*

To gain a better picture of the situation in Egypt, not only regarding Coptic Christians, but also of the government's response to other related issues such as human trafficking, sexual violence, and religious freedom, we have utilized (annual) reports from various NGO's. In addition, we have used other sources that focus specifically on the marginalized position of Coptic Christians in Egyptian law and society.

Furthermore, this report will also use cases which we have received from within the Coptic community without speaking to each of these victims or their relatives. For these cases, we have received official documentation validating their claims, which can be found in chapter four.

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<sup>2</sup> EuroMed Rights. 2018. "EGYPT: Situation Report on Violence against Women." <https://euomedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/201811-Gender-VAW-EGYPT-Factsheet-EN-PDF-MSH.pdf>

Given the current situation regarding the marginalized position of Copts, it remains difficult for victims and their families to seek justice as well as to speak freely about crimes, such as abduction, sexual violence, and forced conversion, committed against Coptic women and girls. This will be discussed in-depth in the following chapters. However, Coptic Solidarity was able to speak to close family members of some missing girls and women, as did some of our own contacts in Egypt. These interviews, and part of more lengthy interviews, have been used to provide insight regarding certain patterns and methods that abductors and their allies utilize and can be found in chapter five of this report (appendix).

### *Key findings*

- Social media (WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram) are typically used to initiate contact with Coptic women/girls.
- Victims and their relatives are almost always threatened to keep silent, even in those cases where women have returned home.
- Data collection of these crimes remains problematic.
- Reports concerning child/forced marriage, sexual violence, human trafficking and other related subjects, do not mention the specific vulnerable position of women from religious minorities in Egypt, i.e. their (lack of access to) legal protection as well as social marginalization.
- Of major concern is the close collaboration between the state security department and Islamic institutions to block out women's family/relatives and expedite the process of conversion.

## 1) COUNTRY PROFILE EGYPT

Article 2 of the Egyptian constitution states that: “*Islam is the religion of the State and Arabic its official language. Islamic law (Sharia) is the principal source of legislation.*”<sup>3</sup> This statement subordinates all non-Muslim Egyptians, and affects their legal, religious and cultural identity. For example, Egyptian legislation, inspired by *Sharia*, regarding marriage and religious conversion are discriminatory towards non-Muslims because a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim, however, Muslim men are allowed to marry a woman from the so-called ‘People of the Book’, i.e. a Christian or a Jewess. In the case of one of the women we interviewed, Marina, her husband was ‘invited’ to become a Muslim after her forced conversion, in order to stay married to his wife.

In addition, Egypt follows the Shafi’i *madhab* (*Sharia* school), however, in some areas the Mālikī *madhab* is dominant. This is important, as it pertains to a Muslim marriage, both these *madhabs* require a *w’lei*<sup>4</sup> (guardian or custodian) to represent the bride (mostly in cases of minors). Some of the women we interviewed, Nada and Marina, signed, under duress, papers to appoint a guardian under the Power-of-Attorney legislation.

Therefore, to analyse the situation in which Coptic women and girls are disappearing, sexually violated, forcibly converted (to Islam) and/or forced to marry, it is helpful to first understand the legal and social context of Egypt regarding the position of women, specifically regarding gender-based violence, gender justice, child marriage, and trafficking. In other words, what are the legal and social challenges Coptic women and their families, as well as organizations like ours, who advocate for justice and equality for the Egyptian Coptic community, face? It is impossible to provide a complete picture of such complicated issues and difficulties in this report, but a summary is provided in the following paragraphs.

Notwithstanding some efforts by the Egyptian government and other state and non-state actors to tackle sexual violence, child marriage, and human trafficking, all these crimes committed against women in Egypt remain a predicament as of today. In fact, according to a report by the US Congressional Research Service: “*Violence against women and rampant*

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<sup>3</sup> “The Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt,” 1971 (as Amended to 2007).  
<https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/Egypt%20Constitution.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> *W’lei* (ولي) share the same root, but is different from *Wali* (local governor, in an Islamic state)

*sexual harassment persist in Egypt.*”<sup>5</sup> It continues stating that Egypt, in the Arab world, ranks highest regarding women (63%) reporting a form of sexual harassment.<sup>6</sup>

It is equally important, as Veldkamp articulated, to realize that religious freedom today is perceived as an individual human rights violation.<sup>7</sup> However, as Veldkamp states, when such persecution is framed as an attack on an individuals' freedom of religion, it becomes an issue between a government and its citizens. This makes it something which may reflect poorly on a country's government and be reflected in various rankings, but which doesn't require active foreign intervention.<sup>8</sup> In his article, Veldkamp specifically addresses rape of women and girls from (ethno) religious communities and how this is perceived today in light of religious persecution:

“Violations might include “forced mass resettlement,” “rape,” “enslavement,” “murder,” and so forth—but only “if committed on account of an individual’s religious belief or practice.”<sup>9</sup>

This recalls what one of the relatives we spoke to mentioned, regarding the targeting of Coptic women and girls as an attempt to shame and possibly breakdown the entire Egyptian Coptic community. According to Veldkamp, the framing of these types of persecution as individual religious freedom violations, allows foreign policy makers and legislators to treat it as an issue between governments and their citizens which then can be graded on country profile lists, without taking further action.<sup>10</sup>

## **1.1 Child- and forced marriage**

Early or forced marriage remains a persistent problem in Egypt, despite declared state policy to eradicate child marriage before the year 2030. According to Girls Not Brides, a global partnership to end child marriage, Egypt has a national strategy to combat child marriage.<sup>11</sup> In their analysis of what drives child marriage in Egypt, several factors are given, including so-

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<sup>5</sup> US Congressional Research Service. “*Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations.*” 2024, 8.

<https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Joel Veldkamp. “*The Persecution of Armenian Christians Is Not Just a Religious Freedom Issue.*” First Things, October 2023.

<https://firstthings.com/the-persecution-of-armenian-christians-is-not-just-a-religious-freedom-issue/>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Girls Not Brides. “*Learning and Resources/Child Marriage Atlas/Egypt.*”

<https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-atlas/regions-and-countries/egypt/>



called temporary “tourist-marriages” with wealthy men from Arab Gulf States. Yet, the disappearance, forced marriage, and forced conversion of Coptic girls is not mentioned.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, EuroMed Rights in their situation report on Egypt also noted these temporary “tourist-marriages” as a form of trafficking, yet failed to mention the disappearance and abduction of Coptic women and girls.

### *1.1.1 Forced conversion*

Forced religious conversion is also not listed as a motivating factor that could drive child marriage in Egypt. Altogether, this leads to invisibility of the abductions, forced marriages, and religious conversion of Coptic girls. Girls Not Brides also notes the specific vulnerability of minor girls from displaced (especially Syrian) refugee communities regarding child marriage. We strongly recommend these NGOs include that girls from marginalized ethno-religious minority groups, such as the Egyptian Coptic community, are equally at risk of increased vulnerability concerning child/forced marriage.

In Egypt, the disappearance of Coptic girls, forced marriage, and forced conversion are intertwined. According to Egyptian law, marriage for anyone under eighteen (18) is not permitted. Human rights defenders have heavily criticized the law because it leaves loopholes, making it easy to avoid legal consequences. For example, the law only states that a marriage contract cannot be formalized (notarized) for anyone under eighteen. But, to circumvent the law, the parents may resort to writing a “customary marriage” contract, containing a written pledge that the contract will be notarized when the bride has turned 18.<sup>13</sup> In cases of disappeared Coptic girls, Islamist lawyers usually help play around the legalities by allowing a “de-facto guardian” assume the role of the parents to handle the contract. What makes this even more complex is the fact that under Egyptian law, marital rape is not recognized as such, meaning that a girl or a woman who was forcibly married does not have legal protection, and, therefore lacks gender justice.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Rabab Azam. “*Unofficial Marriage in Egypt: Your Path to Subjugation and Violence.*” *Zawia3*. 2023. <https://zawia3.com/en/unofficial-marriage-in-egypt/>

## 1.2 Sexual violence

### 1.2.1 Sexual violence in Egyptian Law and Society

As mentioned above, Egypt has the highest rate of sexual harassment in the Arab world, with 63% of women reporting such cases. Laws in Egypt regarding sexual harassment and sexual violence define rape only as intercourse, excluding any other object, tool, or bodily part (fingers, tongue etc.) from the legal definition.<sup>14</sup> What is particularly important concerning sexual violence, forced marriage, and forced conversion of Coptic women and girls, is that according to Egyptian law, sexual harassment is only considered such if the perpetrators' intent was sexual gratification.<sup>15</sup> Thus, when the ultimate goal is not sexual gratification, but rather religious conversion, it becomes nearly impossible, specifically for religious minorities such as Coptic women and girls, to receive protection and justice, and for their relatives and advocates to defend and assist them.

### 1.2.2 Government officials' involvement and threats

According to a report by the International Federation for Human Rights, sexual violence by police and army officials in Egypt has been on the rise since the military took control of governing.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, refugee women and girls from countries such as Yemen and Sudan, suffered sexual violence whilst seeking safety in Egypt.<sup>17</sup> A report by Human Rights Watch (2022) states that the Egyptian government failed to protect these vulnerable women and girls because in several cases, the police refused to file their reports. In one case, a woman who went to the police to file a report, was then sexually harassed at the police station by an officer. According to a spokeswoman of HRW, these women are particularly vulnerable because the Egyptian authorities *"have no interest in protecting them or investigating the incidents, let alone bringing the rapists to justice."*<sup>18</sup> Prior to these incidents, in 2019, African migrant women in Egypt, have mentioned similar cases.

In their report, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), stated that sexual violence and harassment by Egyptian police officers and security personnel in detention

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<sup>14</sup> EuroMed Rights. 2018. *"EGYPT: Situation Report on Violence against Women."* <https://euromedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/201811-Gender-VAW-EGYPT-Factsheet-EN-PDF-MSH.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH). "Exposing state hypocrisy: sexual violence by security forces in Egypt." [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/egypt\\_report.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/egypt_report.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Human Rights Watch. *"Egypt: Sexually Abused Refugees Find No Justice Lack of Investigation, Follow Up by Police."* 2022. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/24/egypt-sexually-abused-refugees-find-no-justice>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

centres is a widespread phenomenon.<sup>19</sup> This report is one of very few that acknowledges the particular vulnerability of Christian women and girls in Egypt due to their religious identity, citing that:

*“Women are targeted in the majority of cases because of the ease with which their religious, tribal or political affiliation can be judged from their external appearance, clothing or behaviour. Violence against women is thus often collective violence against the community to which the women belong.”<sup>20</sup>*

In the interviews Coptic Solidarity conducted, we have heard from several relatives of victims that not wearing an Islamic veil, as an indicator that a woman or girl is a Christian, sometimes signals them out as a target for sexual violence, forced marriage and/or forced conversion. This was also concluded in the report by FIDH which stated that women in the southern part of Egypt, during the military coup, were singled out by Islamists because they were not wearing a veil and therefore, perceived to be Christian.<sup>21</sup>

### *1.2.3 Targeting vulnerable women and children*

Perpetrators of abduction, forced marriage, sexual violence and trafficking often target the most vulnerable women and girls. In addition to the fact that the Coptic community in Egypt is vulnerable due to their religious marginalization, and Coptic women are even twice as vulnerable because of their gender, we have learned from the interviews conducted that many women and girls who have disappeared over the past years either suffered from mental health and / or serious physical health conditions. Examples included clinical depression, Epilepsy, post-natal depression, and such.

Another factor was that, even when girls disappeared around the age of eighteen, the grooming often started at a much earlier age. Additionally, families often were not aware of this process, because young girls were groomed and manipulated into questioning their faith through WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media channels. Lack of education (see country profile Girls Not Brides) is also a factor that we have encountered during interviews regarding a woman who is illiterate (Nada).

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<sup>19</sup> International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH). “Exposing state hypocrisy: sexual violence by security forces in Egypt.” [https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/egypt\\_report.pdf](https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/egypt_report.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

### 1.3 Trafficking

As of 2010, Egypt has implemented a new law to combat human trafficking. Article 3 of this law states that:

*“The consent of the victim to exploitation in any of the forms of human trafficking shall be irrelevant as long as any of the means stipulated in Article 2 of this law have been used.”<sup>22</sup>*

What is stipulated in article 2, and what is referred to here, includes deception, abduction, use of power and fraud. In the case of the disappearance of Coptic women and girls, Coptic Solidarity has noticed that the means used to convert women/girls has shifted from abduction to deception, luring or grooming in many cases. The process of grooming also involves deception, as mentioned in article 2. However, it is far more difficult to prove. Also, punishment involving trafficking of children is considered, according to Egyptian law, more severe than in cases where the victim is an adult. This new law seems to have impacted the strategy of perpetrators. As in the case of some of the Coptic girls that recently disappeared, the grooming started at an earlier age. To avoid more severe punishment, perpetrators waited until the targeted girls reached the age of eighteen to abduct them. This was, for example, the case with Amany, who disappeared two months after she turned eighteen, but the grooming started when she was sixteen, according to her family.

Grooming often starts from within a trusted circle of Muslim friends, or a close female Muslim friend, who start to weave a spider’s web around the victim, for the purpose of either abduction or deception, with directives from more experienced organized (Salafi) groups, until the victim is totally mentally isolated from her family (as in the case of Amany), or taken by force and blackmailed with rape videos to convert. Depending on the vulnerability of the person, this process could happen over days, months, or even years.

#### 2) ABDUCTION AND GROOMING

The abduction, forced marriage, and forced conversion (to Islam) of Coptic women and girls in Egypt often has been met with scepticism or outright denial. It is sometimes argued that

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<sup>22</sup> Arab Republic of Egypt. “Law No. (64) of 2010 regarding Combating Human Trafficking.” [https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/egy/law-no--64-of-2010-regarding-combating-human-trafficking.html/Law\\_64-2010\\_Eng\\_and\\_Ara.pdf](https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/uploads/res/document/egy/law-no--64-of-2010-regarding-combating-human-trafficking.html/Law_64-2010_Eng_and_Ara.pdf)

these cases are mostly situations in which women or girls elope with a Muslim man of their own free will. Professor Clark, in her testimony before the Helsinki Commission (July 2012), tackled this argument by stating that there are far too many cases to entirely overlook or dismiss the possibility of forced disappearance.<sup>23</sup>

There certainly are a number of cases in which Coptic women and girls voluntarily married a Muslim and converted to Islam, but the number of disappearances and the subsequent decision to sever all ties with their families is too substantial to ignore or to assume that the majority of disappearances are voluntary. In fact, the evidence points to the exact opposite conclusion.

Even more so when we consider the fact that family members are often not allowed to report such disappearances to the police, and additionally are forced to deal with (ambiguous) threats by the police. Notably, if the woman's choice had been voluntary, it would not be difficult for local authorities to reach out to the girl/woman in question and request that she restore contact with her family to remove any possible anxiety. See, for example, the case of Amany (chapter four) who was told that isolation from her family and marriage to a Muslim man, was her only option after her conversion in order to remain safe. In her case, this was already planned and discussed with her before she disappeared, under the guise of wanting to protect her. While Amany went to inquire, what decision she made is unknown. With the use of grooming and forcible separation from her family and community, Amany would have been forced to accept life as a Muslim without the option to make her wishes known.

## 2.1 Abduction

Abduction, or kidnapping, is a crime which has long been ignored by researchers within the field of psychology and criminology, and one of the given possible reasons for this underreporting, is the lack of data.<sup>24</sup> Another important aspect is that, according to Beauregard and Chopin, there is a difference between abduction and sexually motivated abduction, because the latter involves other crimes, such as sexual violence or rape, and, consequently, abduction prior to sexual violence, is often overlooked.<sup>25</sup> This distinction is particularly relevant for the cases this report is concerned with, the abduction, forced marriage

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<sup>23</sup> Testimony of Michele Clark. *“ESCALATING VIOLENCE AGAINST COPTIC WOMEN AND GIRLS: WILL THE NEW EGYPT BE MORE DANGEROUS THAN THE OLD? The Disappearance, Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages of Coptic Christian Women and Girls in Egypt.”* July 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012

<sup>24</sup> Beauregard & Chopin. *“Comparison of Sexually Motivated Abduction Cases to Nonsexual Abduction Cases and Nonabduction Sexual Cases.”*

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

and forced conversion of Coptic women. These are almost always cases involving multiple crimes, making the compounded cases extremely difficult to track.

Beauregard and Chopin have noted that sexually motivated abductions are often overlooked, and their analysis concerned Canada and the United States of America. If these types of crimes are overlooked in countries in which people are -legally as well as in society at large- treated equally, then we can easily surmise that in a country such as Egypt, where the Coptic community is marginalized and often faces discrimination, cases of abducted Coptic women remain even more hidden. This becomes apparent when we hear from the relatives of abducted women, that they cannot report the disappearance of their daughters or that they face threats by the police or other security personnel when they try to do so. This compounded vulnerability has surfaced as a primary problem during the interviews we recently conducted.

Finally, where Beauregard and Chopin were concerned with differentiating between abduction and sexually motivated abduction, the religiously motivated crimes of forced marriage and conversion of women and girls from (ethno)religious minority groups, should be recognized as an additional obstacle. This is particularly important because policy makers, NGOs, and politicians often require extensive documentation of abductions before they will act.

## **2.2 Grooming (or luring)**

The Connecticut Children's Alliance (CCA), a non-governmental organization dedicated to end child abuse, defines grooming as following:

*“Grooming is a tactic where someone methodically builds a trusting relationship with a child or young adult, their family, and community to manipulate, coerce, or force the child or young adult to engage in sexual activities.”<sup>i</sup> Some of the signs of grooming can be isolation from families, an increase in unexplained health issues, mood swings and change of character, unexplained gifts and tokens and being overly or fearfully obedient to other caretaker or people in positions of power.”<sup>26</sup>*

In the case of many Coptic women and girls, who are not only part of a marginalized religious group, but who are often also from impoverished backgrounds, wooing them with gifts is not

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<sup>26</sup> Connecticut Children's Alliance. *“What is Grooming? Fact Sheet.”*  
[https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/dcf/gtf-cja/hb-6113/grooming\\_connecticut-safe-sport-policy-child-abuse-prevention\\_digital.pdf/](https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/dcf/gtf-cja/hb-6113/grooming_connecticut-safe-sport-policy-child-abuse-prevention_digital.pdf/)

even necessary. Many have faced such harsh conditions in life, that (romantic) attention and the promise of a better life, will sometimes be enough to lure them into a relationship with a Muslim man. What has become apparent during most of the interviews that we conducted with victims and/or their relatives, is that all these women were gradually isolated from their families, even to the point that they had to sign documents that would give a Muslim guardian the Power-of-Attorney over them. This misuse of legislation not only isolated these women further but also made their families powerless before the authorities.

Christian persecution watchdog Open Doors, in their most recent report, stated that it is very difficult to determine whether a Coptic woman or girl voluntarily eloped with a Muslim man and converted to Islam, or whether force was used by individuals or even organized (Salafi) groups.<sup>27</sup> During the interviews Coptic Solidarity conducted with relatives of missing women/girls, we came across many of the above listed signs of grooming, often not specifically recognized as such by their family members.

Due to the factor of deception, legislation regarding grooming can be problematic. For example, the text and/or the use of definitions, can be interpreted in multiple ways, i.e. extreme broad definitions, vagueness and wording. This can lead to a situation in which the burden of proof for grooming or sexual acts after grooming are placed completely on the victim. Ambiguity of law combined with burden of proof make an eventual conviction within the framework of the law quite difficult, consequently resulting in a lack of legal protection of victims.

### **2.3 Reverse accusations and punishments**

While it is nearly impossible for Copts to report the disappearance of Christian girls and women, Coptic men are punished heavily when there is even the slightest suspicion that they are friendly with a Muslim woman. Rani Raafat, a Coptic man, was brutally murdered for his friendship with a Muslim woman on Facebook. And, in the case of Soad Thabet, it also concerned an alleged friendship that her son held with a Muslim woman, for which the elderly woman (70) was punished.

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<sup>27</sup> Open Doors International/World Watch Research. "Egypt: Full Country Dossier." 2024

### 3) VULNERABILITY OF COPTIC WOMEN

Egypt is placed 38<sup>th</sup> on Open Doors (Full Country Dossier, 2024), annual ranking of the fifty countries where Christians face the most religious intolerance and discrimination.<sup>28</sup> Coptic women in Egypt are not only vulnerable due to their gender, but they are twice as vulnerable because they belong to a marginalized religious minority group. What has also become apparent from the interviews Coptic Solidarity conducted with victims and their families, is that some women and girls are even more vulnerable because they suffer from health issues (such as bipolar disorder or epilepsy) or, for example in the case of Nada, because they lack proper education, or are partially illiterate.

#### 3.1 Invisibility of Copts

Apart from reports by rights organizations, such as Coptic Solidarity and others, aimed at highlighting religious persecution, Copts are almost entirely invisible in other publications. For example, a factsheet by the Egyptian Council for Women on government policies to empower women, makes no reference to Coptic, or more generally Christian, women.<sup>29</sup>

To illustrate, during the Islamic fasting month of Ramadan, a Coptic woman, Niveen Sobhy (30) was assaulted because she had left her house [unaccompanied] and walked outside wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt.<sup>30</sup> When Mrs. Sobhy replied that was her own business, she was hit in the face, multiple times. According to an article by Aid to the Church in Need (ACN) the police denied Mrs. Sobhy the right to file a case report, but rather insisted that she reconcile with her attackers:

*“When I insisted on filing a report, they [the police] threatened to detain me.”<sup>31</sup>*

Mrs. Sobhy turned to the Egyptian National Council for Women (and the Interior Minister and the Egyptian President), hoping they would protect her and intervene on her behalf, but -

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

Note: The most recent list (January 2025) has ranked Egypt at place 40.

<sup>29</sup> Egyptian Council for Women. “Fact Sheet Women’s Empowerment 2014 – April 2020.” <https://ncw.gov.eg/images/PdfRelease/En%20Egyptian%20Women%20Fact%20Sheet%20A-5202018205950691.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Aid to the Church in Need (ACN). “Assault on Coptic Christian woman in Egypt goes unpunished.” <https://www.churchinneed.org/assault-on-coptic-christian-woman-in-egypt-goes-unpunished/>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



just as previously happened at the police station, she was pressured to reconcile with her attackers.<sup>32</sup> Nobody has been punished for the assault on Mrs. Sobhy. According to ACN:

*“Assaults on women and girls who don’t wear the hijab are frequent in Egypt, especially during the month of Ramadan, when Islamic hardliners consider it mandatory.”<sup>33</sup>*

Moreover, a report by the United Nations Women only mentions Coptic and/or Christian women with regard to the fact that Christians in Egypt have their own personal status and family law in cases of, for example, inheritance and divorce.<sup>34</sup> These are just two examples of many in which there is no mention of the special vulnerability of Coptic Christian women in Egypt with regard to their safety and (the lack of) gender justice.

### *3.1.1 Legal and Social Inequality*

According to human rights activist Kamal Sedra in an interview with ACN:

*“The law in Egypt is not the rule, things depend on the mood of the authorities and political will. In the end, there are political calculations and a desire not to anger the Islamists because they represent an important voting bloc. In general, in Arab and Islamic countries, there is a conflict between the international covenants signed by those countries and societal pressure driven by Islamic law. In Egypt, while the constitution stipulates that all people are equal, there is an article that states that Islamic Sharia law is the main source of legislation.”<sup>35</sup>*

As mentioned in previous sections, the religious factor, and the subsequent marginalization of Copts in Egypt, is largely ignored in most analyses. According to the Egyptian constitution, Islam is the state religion and *Sharia* (often defined as ‘Islamic Law’) the main source of legislation.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, the Egyptian government recognizes (even encourages, in various ways) conversion to Islam, but does not recognize (and practically prohibits) conversions from Islam to any other religion. <sup>i</sup> Sometimes, an exception will be made in the case of

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> UNFPA/UN Women. “Egypt Gender Justice; Assessment of laws affecting gender equality and protection against gender-based violence.” 2018

<https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/arabstates/Egypt-Country-Assessment---English-min.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> Aid to the Church in Need (ACN). “Assault on Coptic Christian woman in Egypt goes unpunished.”

<https://www.churchinneed.org/assault-on-coptic-christian-woman-in-egypt-goes-unpunished/>

<sup>36</sup> US State Department. “Report on International Religious Freedom: Egypt.” 2022

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/egypt/>

individuals who were not born Muslim but later converted to Islam (so-called reverting to one's original faith).<sup>37</sup> The right to revert was granted by the Al-Azhar in the case of a Coptic woman named Nada (25). However, permission for other Coptic women and girls to return to their Christian faith is not always granted, although the constitution states that every individual is free to change their religion.

This creates uncertainty and inequality, which specifically affects women and children. Under *Sharia*, a Muslim woman is not allowed to marry outside of her religion, i.e. she is not permitted to marry a non-Muslim man, to the extent that if a Muslim man leaves or publicly criticizes the faith, he would be forced by court to divorce his Muslim wife.<sup>38</sup> However, a Muslim man is allowed to marry someone from the so-called 'People of the Book' (*Ahl al-Kitab*), referring to Christian and Jewish women. This ruling has led to many violent attacks over the last decades, when a Coptic man was accused of having a forbidden relationship with a Muslim woman. For example, the murder of Rani Rafaat in 2022, for his alleged friendship with a Muslim woman on Facebook.<sup>39</sup>

### 3.1.2 Gender-specific discrimination Coptic Women

Coptic women and their bodies are sometimes used to shame and/or avenge the entire Coptic community, as is apparent from the case of Soad Thabet, an elderly lady who was spat on, beaten, stripped naked, and then forced to parade naked through the streets as a punishment for her son's alleged friendship with a Muslim woman back in 2016.<sup>40</sup> The three attackers who faced charges in this case were all acquitted of charges for the violence, sexual harassment and public shaming of Mrs. Thabet.<sup>41</sup>

Using Christian women's bodies to shame the entire community was also mentioned by Amany's uncle, who also stated that these disappearances are happening to shame, and

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Middle East Research and Information Project. <https://merip.org/2010/09/nasr-hamid-abu-zayd/#:~:text=Islamist%20lawyers%20filed%20suit%20to,loving%20couple%2C%20to%20move%20abroad.>

<sup>39</sup> Open Doors. "Egyptian Christian murdered for being Facebook friends with Muslim woman." 2022 <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/news/latest-news/egypt-murder-facebook/>

<sup>40</sup> The Guardian. "Muslim mob in Egypt strips 70-year-old Christian woman." 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/26/muslim-mob-in-egypt-strips-elderly-christian-woman-in-violent-attack>

<sup>41</sup> Raymond Ibrahim. "In Egypt, No Justice for Christians: The Case of Soad Thabet." Middle East Forum, 2023 <https://www.meforum.org/in-egypt-no-justice-for-christians-the-case>

possibly breakdown, the Coptic community at large (see below). In their gender-report (2022) Open Doors noted:

*“Sexual violence, forced marriage, and trafficking stalks marginalized Christian women and girls across diverse global regions, often as a means of punishing and shaming Christian families and communities.”<sup>42</sup>*

Furthermore, under *Sharia*, a non-Muslim cannot be the guardian of a Muslim child. When a Coptic girl is converted to Islam, a Muslim man, instead of her own father, will assume the role of her (legal) representative (*w'lei*), and can give permission for her marriage.

Consequently, when a minor Coptic girl is converted to Islam, her family loses all parental rights over her. This can lead to a situation in which parents who try to report the disappearance of their daughter are denied the right to do so at the police station.

Additionally, Coptic parents (and other relatives) are sometimes forced to sign a restraining order that prevents them from even approaching their daughter.

The most common form of marriage in the case of disappearances is a so-called Urfi (Orfi or customary) marriage, which is an informal type of marriage that requires two witnesses (but is not conducted by a religious official as is the case with formal marriage). As we have demonstrated above, marriage under the age of eighteen can be conducted, due to a loophole in the law, when a husband states he will formalize the wedding contract when his bride turns eighteen, meaning the husband promises that he will later, when the bride turns eighteen, provide all legal documents necessary for registering their marriage. This is another complicating factor that can lead to extreme vulnerability, particularly for Coptic girls.

Similarly, under *Sharia*, a Muslim woman cannot marry a non-Muslim man. This becomes problematic when a married Coptic woman converts to Islam. In that case, her (Christian) marriage is annulled, unless the (Coptic) husband also converts to Islam. Coptic Solidarity has been made aware of several cases involving the disappearance of married women in which this was the case (see next section).

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<sup>42</sup> Open Doors. *“Invisible: The Gender Report 2022.”*

<https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/gender-persecution/The-Gender-Report-2022-DIGITAL-PDF.pdf>

### 3.1.3 *Tawkil (Power of Attorney)*

The Egyptian family status legal system offers a concept of *tawkil*, which can make Coptic women extremely vulnerable, and we came across several situations where this indeed occurred (see cases of Nada and Marina). *Tawkil*, or the Power of Attorney, provides individuals with a legal representative or guardian, to take care of their affairs. This legal power, however, can be misused when an attorney is not acting in the best interest of his/her protegee.

In Nada's case, for example, she signed a document (Power of Attorney) appointing a man (Mustafa) to become her representative, however, Nada is illiterate and did not know what she signed, nor did she understand its legal consequences. In Marina's case, a lawyer filed for a divorce from her Coptic husband on her behalf, using the Power-of-Attorney. This was after her conversion to Islam, and, as mentioned before, now a Muslim, Marina cannot be married to her Christian husband under *Shariah* which is, according to article two of the Egyptian constitution, the law of the land.

### 3.1.4 *State Shelters versus Coptic Convents*

Egypt has adopted a state strategy to combat domestic violence and since 2003, established state shelters for battered women around the country. In their evaluation, Human Rights Watch noted that the Egyptian Criminal Code condones marital violence when committed in "good faith."<sup>43</sup> However, to have access to such a, temporally safe-place, women need to show their ID-card, which is problematic for Coptic women because in Egypt, religion is included on government-issued ID-cards. Women who were forced to convert, and who have had all their official documents changed accordingly, will face extreme difficulties when trying to return [from the shelter] to their family and the Coptic community. Additionally, they will also have to provide a recent police report, even though police will deny them the right to file a report in most cases.

Furthermore, the shelters do not provide safety for victims of incest and/or rape, at a time when a Coptic woman in need of those services would typically be a victim of sexual violence and forced marriage. According to EuroMed Rights, the state shelters function more like prisons than providing a safe-place for women trying to escape domestic violence. Moreover,

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<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Divorced from Justice: Women's Unequal Access to Divorce in Egypt." 2004 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/11/30/divorced-justice/womens-unequal-access-divorce-egypt>

EuroMed Rights noted that the employees in these shelters are not qualified to provide adequate aid to victims of domestic violence and abuse.<sup>44</sup>

Coptic women and girls who are returned after their disappearance, often find a safe haven in a religious convent, making their [future] safety a matter of the Coptic Church, rather than the individual. However, the placement in convents is often the only option to ensure women and their relatives are safe from further threats and/or violence by the perpetrator(s). After their return, most women remain silent regarding the details of their abduction and the sexual violence, forced marriage, and forced religious conversion they endured. It is not difficult to see that the provision of shelter within a religious convent rather than in a government-run shelter, adds to the invisibility and vulnerability of Coptic women and their wider community. Not in the least, because this means that violence committed against these women, again, stays under the radar.

#### 4) CONCLUSION

In recent years, we have seen a growing interest in, and awareness of, gender-based religious persecution in various parts of the world. This is desperately needed in Egypt, since there is an increase of abductions, forced marriages, and forced conversions of women and girls from religious minority groups. However, the dire situation these ethno-religious communities face every day, has not been met with an equally intensified media coverage.

The position of Coptic women within Egyptian society remains fragile. Their combined gender and religious identity are key factors which make these women and girls extremely vulnerable for abduction, grooming, and abuse. The plight of missing Coptic women and girls, and their families, is overlooked due to a lack of sensitivity to their religious identity.

##### 4.1 Recommendations

When we take all of the above into account, Coptic Solidarity recommends that not only the vulnerability of Coptic women and girls be recognized, but the fact that their identity as women from often marginalized ethno-religious minorities make these women even more

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<sup>44</sup> EuroMed Rights. 2018. *“EGYPT: Situation Report on Violence against Women.”*  
<https://euomedrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/201811-Gender-VAW-EGYPT-Factsheet-EN-PDF-MSH.pdf>

vulnerable to abduction, abuse, and religious conversion, with little to no legal protection or recourse.

### **Underage Marriage**

- Amend the law on underage marriage to close the loophole allowing for customary marriages in which the groom promises to register the marriage when his bride turns 18 years of age.
- End “tourist-marriages” with men from Gulf countries
- Effectively enforce the law with real consequences for the adult partner and legislator/government official allowing this crime

### **End Impunity for Perpetrators**

Impunity for all involved with the various crimes is the primary obstacle to ending the targeting of Coptic women and minor girls for abduction, forced marriage, and forced conversion.

The Egyptian government must ensure:

- Local police accept reports of missing Coptic women and search for the missing person.
- Bring legal charges against any officials who refuse to perform their duties of filing an abduction or a missing person’s report, and against all officials who are found complicit in the disappearance of Coptic women & girls, and those who threaten or attack family members for reporting a missing person.
- Bring legal charges against any officials who fail to enforce the law against the perpetrator(s) after their involvement in the abduction, rape, forced conversion or forced marriage has been proven.
- Bring charges against government employees and clergy who issue new conversion and marriage documents when achieved through coercion.
- Revoke license from any Muslim cleric involved in performing coerced marriages and overseeing forced conversions.
- Ensure returned girls and their families are safe from harassment and repeated abductions.

- Provide resources for returned women and their families to receive care from a provider of their choosing, including medical, psychiatric, and therapeutic services.

### **Coptic Representation**

Female Copts and those of other religious minorities are at increased risk for early and forced marriage and all types of sexual harassment and violence. The Egyptian government should ensure Coptic representation across all national strategies and bodies for the promotion of women's rights.

- Appoint Coptic women to the Egyptian National Council for Women, the National Committee for Women, and the Egyptian National Observatory for Women (beyond any current 'symbolic' membership).
- Create a specific strategy for ending early and forced child marriage that tackles the unique situation and vulnerability of Copts to be included in the 2030 National Strategy for Women

### **No Tolerance for Sexual Harassment**

Egypt has the highest rate of sexual harassment in the Arab world with 63% of women reporting such cases. The country and capital of Cairo have been found to be one of the most dangerous cities in the world for women in numerous studies and polls, demonstrating the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment. In Egypt, sexual harassment is only considered such if the purpose was sexual gratification. Thus, ethno-religious minorities targeted with the primary purpose of religious conversion have no legal protection from sexual harassment.

- Egypt needs to amend its archaic and limited protections for women against sexual violence and harassment to meet modern international standards. This should include criminalizing rape regardless of the motivation, to acknowledge an individual's right to full bodily integrity and criminalizing any form of touching or penetration with any body part or foreign object without consent.
- Outlaw marital rape which is not recognized as such in current Egyptian law. This leaves women who have been forcibly married even more vulnerable, while providing no protection for ordinary married women.

## 5) RECENT CASES

*The following is only a sample of cases that provide the reader with different scenarios involved in abductions and luring/grooming of Coptic women and girls. Tens of cases, many of which involve minors, were not included in the interest of keeping the report to a reasonable length. Many of the cases where the girls returned were the result of Coptic activists publicly naming and shaming high ranking officials for being involved or for being complicit in the crimes.*

*The top 4 cases are part of the interviews conducted by Coptic Solidarity where more details can be found in the appendix.*

### 5.1 DETAILED CASES

#### **Amany (18)**

Disappeared on: June 1, 2024

Amany, whose details have been eliminated to protect her identity, disappeared two months after she turned eighteen. According to the messages found on her devices, she was being targeted by a group of Muslim girls from school since she was sixteen, who themselves were being coached by more experienced Salafi men. Other voice recordings from a young man found on her phone show that he promised to take her to Dar-Al-Ifta to have her questions answered, then bring her home safely.<sup>45</sup> The voice messages also demonstrate pressure to break all contact with her family and marry a Muslim man for, as it is portrayed, “her own benefit and protection”.

Although the family was allowed to file a police report, the officer, who happened to be with them when Amany called, didn’t allow them to talk to her or listen in on the call and ended up deleting the number she called from. As of the date



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<sup>45</sup> Note: *Dar Al-Ifta* is an Islamic advisory, judiciary and governmental body, that was established in 2007. On their own webpage they state that they aim to become the world’s authority for Islamic legal interpretation using the latest methods to reach out to Muslims worldwide. <https://www.dar-alifta.org/en>



of publishing this report, Amany is still missing. (see **interview in appendix**).

### **Nada Sobhi Zahi Khalil (25)**

Disappeared on: June 10, 2024

From: Alexandria Governorate

Nada is a married mother of two who disappeared at age 25, and was later returned to her family. Nada is illiterate and suffers from a diminished mental capacity and epilepsy. From a long interview conducted with her, we became aware that a friend of her brothers who knew about her mental health problems targeted her for conversion. He took her to Al-Azhar and in 5 minutes she had an Islamization certificate issued which would also implicate her minor children. Nada's mental condition and illiteracy were taken advantage of to grant Power-of-Attorney to a member of the conversion ring to alter her religion on her Egyptian ID card and to initiate a divorce order on her behalf.

When returned to the police station, Nada was beaten and stripped naked to give false witness against herself in order to protect officials who aided and abetted in her Islamization; (See **interview in appendix**).



### **Marina (25)**

Disappeared on: December 6, 2022

Marina, whose details have been eliminated to protect her identity, had been married for one year when she disappeared. The day she disappeared, an Islamization certificate and a new ID card showing her religion as Muslim were issued for her. A few months later, a video surfaced with Marina wearing the



veil and stating that she converted to Islam; she didn't seem happy. A year later, after much begging from her family to the national security police, and in coinciding with the December 2023 Egyptian Presidential Elections, Marina was returned under the condition that she stay in a convent for her own safety, but less than a month later, she was kidnapped once again. Marina's husband received a legal notice (through power-of-attorney granted to her captors) to either convert to Islam or divorce her. As of the date of publishing this report, the divorce case is before the courts and Marina is still missing. **(See interview in appendix).**

### **Simone Samaan Thabet (22)**

Disappeared on: November 13, 2024

From: Quina Governorate

Simone was diagnosed with severe depression and bipolar disorder when she disappeared. She had been married for two years with no children. The police refused to file a disappearance report until a lawyer got involved. The family went to Al-Azhar to inquire if their daughter was converted to Islam but were threatened and treated with hostility. The family did not know anything about Simone's whereabouts for the entire duration of her disappearance. As we were finalizing this report, two months later, we received word that Simone returned home. **(See interview in appendix).**



## 5.2 MINOR CASES

### **Agibail Magdy (17)**

From: Quseya, Assiut Governorate

Disappeared on: Aug 7, 2022

Returned on: Aug 9, 2022

The cab driver who abducted her was detained and released 3 days later.



### **Angie Ayman Nour (14)**

From: Bayadeia city, South of Luxor Governorate

Disappeared on: December 31, 2023, on her way to a private lesson.

Her parents protested in front the Luxor police station until she was returned on January 3, 2024. The abductor was released after Angie was returned.



### **Sandy Samuel George (16)**

From: Sunbat, Zefta, Gharbeyia Governorate

Disappeared on: March 20, 2023 with a group of girls while visiting Alexandria.

All girls were returned by police one week later except for Sandy who was returned on April 6, 2023.



### **Elham Marzouk Abdel-Messih (16)**

From: Al-mansheia Al-kobra in Assyuit Governorate

The eldest of her siblings who lost both parents as a child, Elham was a gifted student in grade 11. She was abducted while on her way to school on October 15, 2022, and returned on October 20, 2022 Her abductor was released.



**Amira Khalaf Thabet (17)**

From: Guiza Governorate

Amira disappeared on April 5, 2021, and was returned 5 days later. Her sister indicated that she had heard the Imam of the local mosque ask Amira: “won’t you come to us?”, and when she inquired about why he was saying that, Amira explained that he wanted her to convert to Islam so she would marry his son. Accordingly, they knew that these people had their daughter.

Amira’s family accused a girl in her school and another person of luring her. They were eventually able to retrieve her but the abductors did not face any punishment.



**Yvone Emad Thabet (17)**

From: Shubra Al-Khayma, Cairo Governorate

Disappeared on: Nov 16, 2020, on her way home from school.

Returned: 1 week later. No explanation was given to the family and no one was held accountable for her abduction.



**Jessica Samir Morcos (16)**

From: Ezbat El Nakhl, Cairo

Disappeared on: June 24, 2024, while she was on her way to the church gym.

The police refused to file a report. She was returned on July 2, 2024.

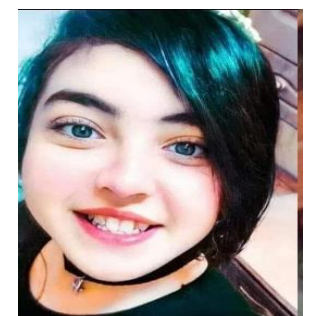


**Demiana Ayman Talaat (15)**

From: Shubra Al-Khayma, Cairo

A special needs child with speech & hearing disability disappeared on April 29, 2022, while on her way to a private tutoring class. The abductor sent a WhatsApp message saying “I need this corpse”.

Demiana was returned 25 days later but no one was held accountable.



**Rania Ayad Farid (17)**

From: Bany Swaif Governorate

Disappeared on: July 24, 2024

Administrative report #3971 for the year 2024 was filed for her disappearance. The police officers confirmed they had Rania in their possession and promised the priest of her church, Fr. Adam, to bring her back. But they kept delaying until her Islamization certificate was completed.

Rania was returned on July 27, 2024, from the hands of a well-known Islamization gang.



**Aghaby Samuel (16)**

From: Kafr Dawud Mattar, Meeit Al Faramawy, Meeit-Ghamr, Daqahleya Governorate

Disappeared on: April 8, 2024

Returned on: April 10, 2024



**Rogina Adel Akladios (15)**

From: Al-Marj, a suburb of Cairo

Disappeared on: April 9, 2024

Returned on: April 20, 2024



**Mohraeel Assaad Romany (16)**

From: Ezzbet Al-Nakhl, a suburb of Cairo

Disappeared on: April 21, 2024

Returned on: April 25, 2024



**Veronia (15)**

(Name was changed and details eliminated to protect her identity)

After a routine visit to a local tutoring centre on March 6, 2022, Veronia did not come home. Her family received messages from anonymous sources threatening them to not look for her. The police were able to return her within 48 hours after having been gang raped by 5 men. No one was held accountable although her attackers were known to the police.



**Martina Ossama Ramzi Ebrahim (16)**

Disappeared on: May 17, 2024

From: Mansheyat Nasser, Cairo Governorate

A 16-year-old girl from Mansheyat Nasser, Cairo, Egypt worked as a housekeeper. She disappeared after receiving a call to go clean a home. Her case, registered under police report number 1547/2024, is a poignant reminder of the pervasive danger and vulnerability faced by young Christian women in Egypt.

Martina is said to be held by Sheikh Sayed Al-idrisi, who is apparently one of the (sufi) sheiks known to and revered by President Al-Sisi



**5.3 ADULT CASES**

**Martina Mamdouh Wadie (22)**

Disappeared on: May10, 2024

From: Helwan, Cairo Governorate

After an accident in in January 2024 (nose broken & concussion of the brain), Martina became bipolar and was under medication. A Muslim man (Mr. Yasser Mustafa) impersonated a Christian (Kyrolos) who was present at the moment of the accident, drove





Martina to the hospital at the time of the accident and paid the hospital medical fees (30 000 EGP). Martina's father later reimbursed these fees.

Martina disappeared on May 10, and two days later Mr. Yasser Mustafa called Martina's father to inform him that Martina has converted to Islam and then had her appear in a video where a conversion certificate was also shown. **Martina was returned on May 17, 2024**

### **Monica Wagih Youssef (23)**

Disappeared on: May 10, 2024

From: Qalyub Al-Balad, Qalyubiya Governorate

Monica, a 23-year-old law student at Ain-Shams University in Egypt, was abducted from her hometown of Qalyub Al-Balad, Qalyubiya. Her abduction, detailed in police report 635/2024 from Qaliyoub Police Station, tragically involved deception by authorities who misled her father into unknowingly signing a restraining order. As of now, Monica has not been released, leaving her family and community devastated. Her absence is keenly felt among those who know her as a dedicated student and promising young woman.



### **Heba Atef Bedeir (19)**

Disappeared on: May 18, 2024

From: Kom-Mataay, Minya Governorate

A 19-year-old from Kom-Mataay in Minya, Egypt was tragically abducted and her whereabouts remain unknown. Heba has a mental illness, making her especially vulnerable. The uncertainty surrounding her disappearance has left her family and community in a state of anguish.

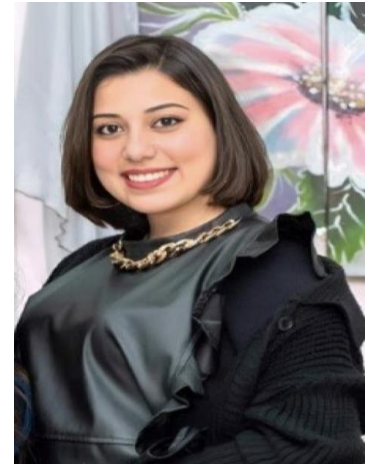


**Erini Ebrahim Shehata (20)**

Disappeared on: January 20, 2024

From: Assiut, Governorate

A 20-year-old student from Assiut, Egypt, studying at the Faculty of Medicine at Assiut University, remains abducted and forcibly converted to Islam. Since her abduction, three ID cards have been fraudulently issued across different governorates, altering her religious identity. Her kidnapper, a 27-year-old colleague at the same university, continues to hold her captive. Authorities have refused to intervene, citing concerns over armed resistance in the kidnapper's village. **Police report: 707 / 2024, Assiut Police Station.**



**Mary Gerges Nessem Rezk (23)**

Disappeared on: March 25, 2024

From: Meeit-Ghamr, Daqahleya Governorate

A 23-year-old woman from Meeit-Ghamr, Egypt, and her three-year-old daughter, Maroska Romani, were abducted in a harrowing incident that has left their family in a state of despair. Mary, a devoted wife and mother, had her life abruptly torn apart, and despite ongoing efforts, they have not yet been released. The traumatic event has left a void in their community, as friends and loved ones desperately await their safe return.





**Samia Milad Guirguis (46)**

**From:** Al-Senga village in the Markaz Ibshiwai District, Fayoum Governorate

Married and a devoted mother, Samia's life was upended when she disappeared. The situation took an even more heartbreaking turn when her son, Mina, went to the local police department in Ibshiwai to file a report about her abduction. In a twist of fate, he too has vanished, leaving their family in utter despair. The date of Samia's abduction remains unknown, adding to the anguish and uncertainty her loved ones' face.



**Amal Asaad Abdel Malak (18)**

Amal, whose details have been eliminated to protect her identity, was a diploma student from a low-income family who was kidnapped on July 30, 2022, while on her way to church. Amal is the only child to aging parents and was engaged to be married. Her disappearance report was filed under (administrative report # 4024). Two of her school mates – both niqabi women- were relatives of the mayor of her village. They plotted to kidnap her and convert her to Islam by introducing her to the mayor's nephew who started to chase and flirt with her in person and in WhatsApp messages. In the last chat before her disappearance, Amal was told that she would be kidnapped, but took it as a joke and laughed it off. Amal was kidnapped, drugged and raped. Her rape was video recorded in order to deter her from going back to her former life. The nephew invited her to convert to Islam and marry him, which she did, since like most victims, she was made to believe that her family would not take her back. The next day, Amal appeared in a video wearing the Niqab and declaring that she had converted to Islam. Shortly after, an Islamization certificate and an Urfi marriage certificate were posted. Because Amal was only 18, she needed a *w'lei* (Guarantor)



to sign the certificate such as her dad, older brother, or uncle. A stranger became her *w'lei* to execute the agreement.

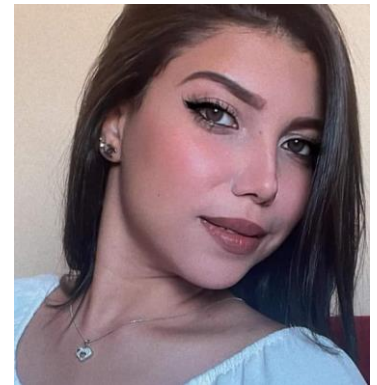
Due to extensive pressure from a sister organization on the abductors, Amal was returned. But her fiancé broke up with her since in an honour culture, she had become damaged goods. Also given that she was only 18 years old, she cannot repeal her Islamization certificate until she turns 21. Now, under *Sharia*, a non-Muslim cannot be the guardian of a Muslim child, and Amal being under 21 was still Muslim, so the mob, incited by the mayor, have continued to protest and call for violence against Christians until Amal is returned to her kidnappers.

**Mariam Tarek Fathy (22)**

Disappeared on: November 15, 2024

From: Assiut Governorate

After graduating from law school, Mariam decided to take an English course and disappeared on her way to class. The next day, Chief of police contacted her father and said come see your daughter, but don't overreact, implying that he would be violent, otherwise we will detain you. When the parents went, Mariam came in wearing a veil. She was crying hysterically and was mumbling. As her mom tried to hug her, she fainted. Mariam screamed to see her mom collapse but the officers pulled her out, told her parents that she eloped with a Muslim man and made them sign a restraining order under threats. In reality, Mariam was abducted by a gangster and a drug dealer, which made no sense for a woman of her status. Mariam is now pregnant, and her dad is pleading to get his daughter back, regardless of her condition.



**Marina Farid Hanna (25)**

Married, no children.

From: Shubra Al-Khaymah, Manta, Qalyubiya Governorate

Disappeared on: January 11, 2024

Returned on: 17 January, 2024



**Christina Salah Mokhtar Iskandar (19)**

From: Minya Governorate

Student in Qena University

Disappeared on: January 20, 2024

Returned on: February 1, 2024. A conversion certificate (to Islam) was circulated days after her disappearance



**Mariam Nabil Alfy (22)**

From: Al-Hawasleya, Minya Governorate

Disappeared on: February 22, 2024

Returned on: March 4, 2024



**Sara Atdly Shaha (24) and Her daughter Merrit Romany**

From: Al-Bayda village, Al- Nahda, Amereya, Alexandria

Married

Disappeared on: March 10, 2024

Returned on: March 21, 2024



**Marina Emil I Gad Al-Rabb (18)**

From: Mokattam, Al-Sieed

Disappeared on: March 7, 2024

Returned on: April 9, 2024



**Christina Safwat Fares (22) & Her baby son**

From: Ezbet Al-Ganadi, Ahnasia, Beni Suef Governorate

Married

Disappeared on: April 12, 2022

Returned: April 17, 2022



**Sandy George Shawky (22)**

From: Shubra Al-Khaymah, Kalyoubeua Governorate

Disappeared on: May 9, 2024

Returned on: May 13, 2024



**Teresa Thabet (31)**

From: Wadi Al-Natroun, Beheira, Wadi Al-Natroun, Beheira

Governorate

Married

Disappeared on: May 10, 2024

Returned on: May 25, 2024



**Nessma Emad (36)**

From: El-Badari, Assiut Governorate

Married

Disappeared on: May 25, 2024

Returned on: May 28, 2024



❖ **The Case of Amany (18), student**

Amany disappeared on June 1, 2024, two months after she turned eighteen, but according to the messages found on her devices, she was targeted since age sixteen. Amany came from a middle-class family from Assiut Governorate. She was a good student. Her father worked hard and spent all his money to make sure his children lived well and received a good education. There were no conflicts and Amany was on good terms with her family prior to her disappearance. Coptic Solidarity spoke with Amany's sister and her uncle. As of the day of publishing this report, Amany is still missing.

According to the family, Amany was not the only Christian girl at school, but was seen as an easy target because she lived in a village that did not have a church. In her school, all students were required to cover their hair, so she could not be identified as Christian in the typical way by her exposed hair, or a Coptic cross tattoo on her wrist. Rather, she was flagged by a network of Muslim girls in the school who targeted her for two years on WhatsApp and Instagram chat groups, from the age of sixteen, planting doubts in her mind about her Christian faith and distancing her mentally and emotionally from her family. The girls, as it became known later from the messages found on her phone, were being coached by more experienced Salafi men who established a process to lure girls under the premise of seeking more knowledge about the religion of Islam. When a Christian girl follows the advice of her friends and goes to inquire at Islamic institutions, the girls are immediately converted and a restraining order is issued against her family members through the help of high-ranking security officials, in order to further isolate her and prevent her from seeking help.

*Disappearance*

The day Amany disappeared, she told her family that she was going to school to complete her last exam and would be coming home in the afternoon. But, she never arrived at her school and never came home. By midnight, the family started to check at hospitals to no avail. The next morning, they went to her school to ask if she ever arrived the previous day. The administrator assured them that she did but declined to show them attendance records claiming that the records had already been sent to the school district. He also would not show them camera footage explaining that he was a visiting teacher supervising the exams.

When the family went to file a police report, the officer decided to accompany them to her school. It was then that they saw the records and discovered that Amany never arrived at school that day. According to Amany's sister, as they left the school, the officer tried to pressure her to say that her sister was in a romantic relationship (not being chaste) so that he could create a story explaining her disappearance.

Sister            *“We went to my sister's school, The investigator made us stand outside and kept talking to the principal, then called me and made me aware she didn't come to school, then as we were leaving, he tried to pressure me to say my sister was befriending someone (in our culture, that would be shameful), and*

*asked me who he was, so I said, if I knew I wouldn't go to the police, I would go to church or to my family."*

**CS "Did you feel intimidated by the police?"**

Sister *"Yes. He wanted me to tell lies or give a certain answer (to imply my sister wasn't chaste)."*

*\*Note: This is a pattern you will see repeat in the interview with Nada where the Coptic victim (or her relatives) is pressured to falsely admit to her being involved in a sexual affair, implying that she has loose sexual morality. Increasing the stigma of loose sexual morality is especially sensitive in a culture in which feelings of shame associated with gender-based religious persecution are already present, and abused by perpetrators (CS).*

The police officer then, in a procedural innovation, decided to go home with them to search for clues. This was suspicious and proved malicious later. Amany's sister, mother, and uncle were asked to ride in the police car and they all made their way back home.

**CS "Did the police allow you to file a report?"**

Sister *"Yes, they did, my mother, my uncle and I did. After they questioned each of us separately, they sent an officer with us home, but he was not treating us nice. At home, he kept searching in my sister's papers, looking for a letter or a note. On the way, he had taken my two phone numbers, so when we came in, one of them rang, and we heard her voice. He then pushed us all out of the room and took the phone inside and finished the call with her without letting us hear what she was saying or what he was saying. After that, he deleted the number that my sister called from."*

Uncle *"It was a conversation less than 30 seconds. She said, "I left" and that's it. Then the officer took the tablet and finished it [the call]. We don't know what he did or said to her. We don't know. We were not allowed to speak with her."*

**CS "Was the relationship with the family fine before Amany disappeared?"**

Sister *"Yes, we had a good relationship."*

According to the family, as the police officer decided to leave their home, he asked the sister to come with him in the car to complete the report but refused to allow the mother and uncle to ride with them although they all came in the same car. He pushed them out and told them to take another car and follow them so he could further intimidate the sister.

According to Amany's uncle, her forced disappearance is part of a plan to humiliate Copts:

Uncle *"This is a plan to humiliate our faith, not to humiliate a girl personally, and it has nothing to do with the girl's manners (i.e. moral values). Let me assume that a girl was raised who was not well behaved, or whose thinking was skewed or perhaps she was not strong with regards to her relationship with the*



*church, that still does not call for taking her hostage and negotiating over her until she reaches legal age.”*

He further explained that many Syrian and Lebanese women refugees, who happen to be much prettier than Coptic women, live in their city but are not targeted, which makes him believe that humiliating Copts or breaking down the Coptic faith is the goal. He argues that unless a girl is brought in front of her family to tell them that she is willingly leaving and wants nothing to do with them, that she is choosing to convert to Islam, then there must be foul play.

### *The Voice Recordings*

After Amany’s disappearance, her family found voice recordings and group chats on her Instagram account which they forwarded to us. The chats were with a girl named Amira and a man named Islam. Amira was a Muslim friend at school and part of the Islamization ring. Islam was a young Muslim man introduced to Amany by Amira as a trusted friend who wanted to educate her about the religion of Islam so, from his perspective, he could get heavenly credits “thawab.” During their conversations on Instagram, Islam tried to convince Amany to end all contact with her family and marry a Muslim man for, as he portrays it, “her own benefit and protection.”

*\*Note: In the report by Clark and Ghaly for Christian Solidarity International there are similar stories of Coptic girls who were first befriended by Muslim young women and then gradually introduced to a man before their disappearance and conversion. This still seems to be the strategy, at least in some of the stories we are aware of, such as this one (CS).<sup>46</sup>*

Islam’s voice messages were lengthy and repetitive as he tried to convince Amany to go with him to get more information while trying to demonstrate that he and Amira were trustworthy. In the interest of brevity, we will summarize the key findings regarding the process leading up to her disappearance:

- Islam convinced Amany that he wanted to take her and Amira to “(Dar Al-Ifta)\* so that she could inquire about the theological questions she had, and if she was not convinced by the end of it, he would personally bring her back home safely and she could forget all about it.
- Islam also convinced Amany that a senior family member of his, one who understands the process, needs to accompany them in order to get authorization from the security police for her to visit (Dar Al-Ifta); otherwise, she and Amira could get arrested.

*\*Note: Dar Al-Ifta is an Islamic advisory, judiciary and governmental body, that was established in 2007. On their own webpage they state that they aim to become the world’s authority for Islamic legal interpretation using the latest methods to reach out to Muslims worldwide (CS).<sup>i</sup>*

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<sup>46</sup> Clark & Ghaly. “Tell My Mother I Miss Her: The Disappearance, Forced Conversions and Forced Marriages of Coptic Christian Women in Egypt (II).” Christian Solidarity International. July, 2012  
<https://csi-usa.org/TellMyMotherIMissHer.pdf>

He also explained that the Sheikh they are going to meet for inquiry, Sheikh Nasser, has expertise changing the paperwork for converts, feeding, hosting and getting them work, even wives/ husbands. He also added that the Sheikh will get a restraining order against Amany's family from the national security police.

*\*Note: This seems to imply that upon her conversion, all contact with her family and friends would end and she would start a completely new life somewhere else (CS).*

Amany's family never heard from her again aside from that short phone call.

### ❖ The Case of Nada (25) - Alexandria

Nada is a married mother of two. She disappeared at age 25 and was later returned to her family. As a result of a stroke she had experienced after giving birth to her second child, Nada suffered from epilepsy. Additionally, her mental capacity deteriorated rendering her legally unfit for making serious adult or life changing decisions. Nada is also illiterate.

Nada spends the summer in her family home in Agamy, Alexandria where a Muslim friend of her brother called Saleh frequently visited him and became aware of her health and mental health troubles. After a fight with her husband, Nada went to Alexandria, from Cairo, for an extended stay at her parents' home. That is when Saleh took note and decided to take advantage of the situation. He started to correspond with Nada on Facebook, and she, thinking of him as an old friend of her brother's, started to engage. Originally the messages were friendly, but then Saleh started to claim that he was in love and wanted to marry her.

On June 10, 2024, as Nada was going grocery shopping, she disappeared, and her phone was found turned off. After 24 hours of her disappearance, the family filed a police report #6286 in Dekhila police station. Due to lack of action, they went to file a report at the national security office and were turned away with the excuse that she was of age. What was shared by Nada later in an interview was that she ran into Saleh who had a car waiting for him and took her to Cairo to convert her to Islam.

#### *Taking advantage of Nada's illiteracy*

According to Nada, Saleh introduced her to a man, Mustafa, who was not a lawyer, but would be taking care of the paperwork.

Nada            *“This Mustafa took us first somewhere to take our finger prints, then we did some paperwork. Saleh told me that this is what is called the Power-of-Attorney (tawkil in Arabic) for that man (Mustafa) to finish all necessary paperwork. This man, Mustafa, had processed my papers on his own, but I don't know what kind of papers they were.”* And, *“I also went to the Registrar's Office to do fingerprints. He went in and paid the fees and took me inside where I signed and wrote my name and submitted my finger prints.”*

#### *Conversion to Islam*



Nada *“After that, we left and went to Al-Azhar, a place called Islamic Research Academy. They asked me some questions about religion and then they made me sign something too.” ... “They asked if I believe whether Jesus was a God or not. Prior to the questioning at this Academy, he [Saleh] had advised me to answer “No” and that I also had to say that Jesus was “a prophet just like Mohamed was a prophet.” Saleh also told me to say that “At church the women don’t dress properly, but in Islam they do. I remember that they did not ask many questions, just two. They also asked me what I had memorized (from the Qur’an). I had the Fatiha (first surah) memorized, and they then asked me to recite it, which I did. That was it. They made me sign something, and then in less than five minutes, they issued me the certificate (of her conversion to Islam).”*

Nada *“Beforehand he (Saleh) had bought me a gown, a veil and a burqa. They then took me to a photo studio where they got my pictures and gave them to us. After that they issued the certificate and then the other man (Mustafa) left.”*

**CS “So the Sheikh when you were declaring [that you were Muslim], did he not tell you anything?”**

Nada *“He said many things but I couldn’t understand”*

**CS “Did you ever read or study the Quran or know about Islam before your conversion?”**

Nada *“No, I did not.”*

### *Planned conversion*

**CS “What happened when you left?”**

Nada *“The man, Mustafa, said that he had to do the paperwork, but I didn’t understand what this paperwork was. They were talking and I didn’t understand anything or know anything, but then Saleh took me to Minya, and while we were in the car, his siblings seemed to already know.”*

**CS “Do you mean that this man’s family already knew that he would take you and convert you to Islam, including his wife and children?”**

Nada *“His kids are young, but his wife knew. He told them a while back, and he also told his siblings and his mother that he wanted to convert me. He told me: “My wife knows that you are converting to Islam and that I am helping you with that, but she doesn’t know that I will marry you.”*

### *Insecurities*

Saleh’s father did not like the fact that his son took Nada to their village. Now there was a problem with where they had to let her stay and Saleh then decided to bring her to a friend called Mohammed in Minya. But upon arrival, Mohamed said it would not work because the

people there will know that Saleh and Nada were not married, so the plan was changed and Nada was brought to stay with another man and his family.

Nada *“On day three, his wife said to me: “I want my husband to have a second wife. I am okay with that, and that she comes and lives with me here. This is Allah’s Sharia and I can’t stop it. That would be haram.”*

**CS “So this man’s wife actually encouraged her husband to marry you?”**

Nada *“Yes, she did. That’s what happened. At first, I didn’t understand and asked her “How could you say that? There is no normal woman who would want her husband to marry another wife.” She would reply and say “but this is Allah’s sharia and if I say no, I would make Allah angry.”*

### *Sexual intimidation*

Nada *“Then the next day the guy started to make me distrust Saleh. He said this man was not a good man. He tried, not once or twice, he kept telling me this. He said [Saleh] will take you away from here to put you in an apartment where he can take advantage of you. Also, he knew I had money in the bank. So, he told me: ‘ he [Saleh] knows that your siblings are in the States and will ask them for one or two million, but he doesn’t love you and doesn’t want you.’; “and then he told me: “keep things as they are and pretend not to suspect anything. Talk to him normally until he finishes the paperwork and gets your national ID card issued and then I will marry you.” \**

*\*Note: Many families report to us that there is a price tag associated with the conversion of a Coptic woman some even have a higher price than others depending on their appearance, social status, education and whether they come from a family of clergy. Coptic Solidarity didn’t independently verify this claim; however, if true, this may explain the competition between the two men and their wives regarding who would be marrying Nada (CS).*

**CS “What was your reaction? Were you convinced?”**

Nada *“I had no reaction. I was shocked. That day I was afraid. I was afraid and wanted to leave but they always locked me in at all times.”*

Nada *“As soon as he said we would get married, I became afraid of the man himself; and his looks at me were dirty and the way he talked wasn’t good, he would say inappropriate things just in the middle of his conversations with me.”*

**CS “What inappropriate words was he using? What made you feel he wanted something inappropriate from you?”**

Nada *“He would use his hands and pretend it was a joke, but he would grab me, hit me, wrap his hand around my shoulders, still pretending he was being funny.*

*He would never do this in front of his wife though. I started to feel really afraid but I could not leave.”*

**CS** “**Why didn’t you tell him to stop?”**

Nada *“I was afraid and unable to speak. I kept calling Saleh, tried to talk with him.”*

**CS** “**What did he say to you?”**

Nada *“From day one, I had told him that these people were not good to me and that I was not feeling comfortable there and that I wanted to leave. He would tell me just wait for a day or two...etc. The last two days I told him that this man was making dirty remarks and that he was touching me too. Then Saleh came and took me away from there. He said he did not realize this was happening.”*

### *Police Inquiry*

The next day, Saleh came and took Nada to stay with his family. Here is what happened next:

Nada *“I spent the first night and then the next night the police showed up past midnight. I went up to the police van, and the homeowner and two of his sons were also taken. The van was full so they made me wait in the street and asked me what are you doing here? I said “I was with Saleh and went and converted to Islam.” So the police officer saw me wearing the gown but the veil was on my shoulder, so he rebuked me and said “aren’t you Muslim now?” I said yes, so he said in a strict voice “so why is your head uncovered? Wear your veil.”*

Nada *“He (the officer) kept telling me “Don’t be afraid. Stick to your faith. They (her Coptic family) will bring you people to beat you up or pressure you. They will ask priests or brothers to convince you to go back, but you must not listen to them. If you go back (to Christianity) you will be destroyed: either they will kill you or send you to a monastery where you will be locked up for the rest of your life.*

*He kept telling me, you should say “even if you kill me, I will die a Muslim.” And he kept repeating Al-Fatiha (the first chapter of the Qur’an) and also the Surah... oh, I remember. It was “say Allah your god is one...” The officer made me say this Surah and Al-Fatiha...all these things while waiting in the van.”*

**CS** “**How did Saleh react during all this time you were in the van?”**

Nada *“I don’t know but he was afraid and told me if you change your mind both of us will be in big trouble, but that he loved me and wanted to marry me and so on.”*

### *At the police station*

Nada *“After that they took us to the National Security building in Minya. I entered into a room where I spent the night and the entire next day. Then at the end of*

*the day, they came and took me to see the (so-called) “Big Boss.” I first entered and he started to bang on the table and curse me calling me bad names. He would say Bit\*\*\* or M\*F\* etc. Lots of bad talk. Then he started accusing me, saying “I know everything about you Bit\*\*\*, father (Coptic priest) so and so and father so and so told me all about you and Hussein.”*

*\*Note: According to the United State Department Human Rights Report on Egypt (2022), police and prison guards, during interrogation, regularly use beatings and commit sexual abuse, including stripping detainees naked. Another form of abuse of power by police and prison guards mentioned in the report is psychological abuse. The report also states that sexual harassment by the Egyptian police remains a problem, according to several NGO’s and the (Egyptian) media.*

**CS** “Who is this Hussein?”

Nada “That is someone I knew a long time ago. He said he knew everything about us, that I used to go to his house and he comes to mine (implying a dishonourable relationship). I told him that this was not true, that none of this happened, that I only ever spoke to Hussein on the phone. As soon I said this, he told me to “Shut up Bit\*\*\*”.”

**CS** “Did any of your priests really tell him these things?”

Nada “I don’t know, but he said father so and so. He never mentioned any proper names, so I don’t know where he came up with these stories. And every word I tell you, was preceded by a million foul words and followed by a million foul words.”

**CS** “Would you mind telling us what kind of words he used, Nada?”

Nada “He called me a whore.”

The officer starts interrogating Nada regarding her marriage to her Coptic husband, asking her when her marriage took place, whether she was happily married, was it an arranged marriage etc. Later, Nada found out that all of their conversation was recorded. She continues her story:

Nada “With every answer I gave, the officer told me that I am a liar, and that there was some sort of special device behind me that reveals my lies, which they had imported from abroad. He told me to say that Hussein came to my home 4 times (to make out) and that I broke up with him when he started to ask me to go to his house after it became harder for me to come to him.”

**CS** “But you just told us that you only spoke to this Hussein on the phone?”

Nada “Yes.”

**CS** “So why did you say that?”

Nada *“I don’t know. He asked me to say that. I originally didn’t want to say that but he hit me, and the gown (Islamic dress) I was wearing had a zipper that spanned the length of it. I was only in my underwear under the gown, so once he unzipped the gown, I was undressed, standing in front of him in my underwear.”*

*He told me: If you don’t say what I tell you, I will bring you two guys to assault you Bit\*\*\* I felt that he was threatening to have two men rape me. I mean, what else would he mean by that, specifically because at that point, I was undressed? I was afraid so I said I will do whatever you ask, I was terrified and I was crying.*

*He was telling me what he wanted me to say, which I did, I told him what he wanted to hear, which is that Hussein came to me four times and my relationship was discontinued with him after that. He also made me say that I had sex with Saleh in his apartment, which I never did.”*

**CS “And all of that was a lie?”**

Nada *“Yes, he made me repeat everything. Also, that Saleh and I had sex (in my home). He even made me give details.”*

**CS “Details of the sexual relationship you mean?”**

Nada *“Yes, he told me you will be asked this and you answer that. All the time, when he made me say these things, he was holding an extension cord in his hands. I thought he wanted to beat me with it.”*

**CS “Do you mean, something like a cable? Did you feel threatened by it?”**

Nada *“Yes, he said I will ask you two words and you give me direct answers. When they let me out (of the room) I overheard him telling another officer “See? She enters Islam and then turns out to be so and so”*

**CS “What did he mean, you think?”**

Nada *“He used the same word I said before (whore) and then he emphasized on the point that after I got my Islamization certificate, I went to the apartment (with Saleh). He strongly emphasized that, like I had committed immoral acts, after I had become a Muslim. Like, the first time was a mistake because I was not yet Muslim, but then later (with Saleh) again.”*

**CS “This is what they have recorded in the police report as well?”**

Nada *“Yes. Then, about 30 minutes later, the officer who forced me to make a false testimony took me and blind-folded me, then we walked for a long time. I either went up or down some stairs and then I was put in a cell all by myself and he removed the blindfold. That was night, and then he took me out at the end of the next day. I waited for about an hour and the same officer came with*

*another man and asked about my clothes. I said: here they are. He said: Take off what you're wearing and put on your (original) clothes."*

**CS "Did he tell you to take off the gown (Islamic dress)?"**

Nada *"Yes, I changed into my original clothes and they let me wait another 30 minutes, and the same officer came back and took me to the original room I entered from (like a gate), and he made two policemen handcuff me and place me in a prisoner's van and he took me back to Samaloot, to the National Security building. I was there for two days."*

*"There is something, when I stayed there, they called me and asked me where my original Islamization certificate was. I replied that it was with Mustafa in Cairo. Then they asked me whether I knew his last name, or anything about him, and I said I didn't. After a while, when I was brought to the National Security office in Samaloot, my brother Adel and my father came and picked me up."*

#### ❖ **The Case of Marina (25)**

On December 6, 2022, Marina was going to catch up with her husband who was traveling for work when she disappeared. The same day she disappeared, she had an Islamization certificate and an ID-card issued for her. Her disappearance lasted for almost a year, and suddenly, only days before the December 2023 Presidential elections, she was returned. Her family placed her in the St. George Convent in Quina as instructed by the police who brought her back; however, she was kidnapped once again on January 6, 2024, from the convent. As of the day of publishing this report, Marina is still missing.

#### *Disappearance*

Marina was working as a hairdresser for a man called Hamam. On the day she was going to catch up with her husband, she disappeared, and her phone was found turned off, leaving her family without any information about her whereabouts.

Marina's father, a tailor, was doing work for someone in the National Security building, so for months, he went to his office begging for help to find his daughter. Eventually that high-ranking official identified her location and contacted it, then asked the woman on the other side to hand the phone to Marina. When Marina's father was able to talk to her, Marina was crying and told him that there was a man guarding her and that she would not be able to escape with him being present there, watching her at all times.

Also, according to Marina's sister, their brother decided to go look for his sister at the address posted on her new ID-card. He found the building surrounded by armed guards and surveillance cameras but decided to ask the guards if there was a hairdresser living there. When they answered "yes", he made a kerfuffle to go up and find his sister, but they beat him and called the police on him where he was detained and later let go. According to the sister, her brother saw Marina look out the window but was unable to talk to her.

**CS** “Was Marina happily married? Can you describe her relationship with her husband?”

Sister “They had just been married for a year, so their relationship was normal, happy. The only issue was that he would be in the job for a while and then out of the job for a while.”

### *Conversion to Islam*

**CS** “We understand that there has been a video wherein Marina declared she is now a Muslim?”

Sister “Yes, and also the Islamization certificate was published. She also had filed for divorce in the court (via power-of-attorney), and hearings were still in progress, so until she gets a legal divorce, she would still be married to her (Christian) husband.”

*Note: According to Sharia, a Muslim woman cannot be married to a non-Muslim man; as such, the divorce application also gives the husband the option to convert to Islam; otherwise, he would have to divorce his wife (CS).*

**CS** “Marina now officially is a Muslim, but we don’t know if there is any case of enforced marriage?”

Sister “There is no paperwork that demonstrates such a marriage took place. But she did tell me that she was being treated like a concubine.”

**CS** “Do you know if there was filming of rape perhaps, something to blackmail her with?”

Sister “She was too terrified to say, but we could see it on her face. She was afraid of him and that he was blackmailing her - she felt she had to go back to him.”

**CS** “Do you believe your sister truly converted to Islam out of her own free will?”

Sister “Marina when she came back, while she stayed in the convent, was praying diligently and attending liturgical services and vesper prayers. She was having communion and was very engaged in all of it. She did not seem like someone who had forgotten her Christianity. She told me that she, when she was with them, did not observe Ramadan nor kneel down in (Islamic) prayer with them. She is not concerned at all about Islam, the only thing that made her go there is fear.”

**CS** “Is your family known to be an observing, Christian family?”

Sister “They all know that Marina is a Christian and that she is pretty.”

### *Coptic Convent*

Marina was released and then brought to a Coptic convent where her family could visit her.

However, she was taken away from the convent after a few weeks and her family has lost all



contact with her ever since.

**CS “Can you tell us how Marina returned to the (Coptic) convent?”**

Sister *“Marina appeared, and they contacted us. They first contacted Bishop Sharobeem and told him to bring her (Marina’s) father and sister and two priests from your church to pick her up. We went and waited for five hours in his office for no reason. We were not having any dialogue and there was no good reason for us to stay there all that long. It seems they were trying to intimidate us. For the entire duration of the five hours, we did not get to see Marina. Then they made us sign some documents without letting us see what is it that we were signing.”*

*“They said, look, Marina will go with you but don’t take her home. We asked them why and they said it was because if the thugs that work for Hamam, find out and come to attack us, they won’t be able to protect us. They said they didn’t want trouble.”*

Sister *“The officer told us to take her to the convent but insisted that it would be St. George’s convent in Quina. He also said when you go see her there, don’t ask her any questions and don’t discuss details of anything that happened.”*

Sister *“She now has no paperwork to declare that she is a Muslim – obviously that was a lie. Hamam took her without any marriage, not even Urfi [customary] marriage. They treat Coptic women like concubines, sleep with them and get off-spring from them, but a piece of paper to declare that she is his [legal] wife, no, they won’t do that.”*

*Note: Once Christian women have children, it becomes hard for them to go back and leave them behind, because they will not get custody of their children (CS).*

**CS “Do you think that she complied out of fear, or did she accept this situation freely?”**

Sister *“Out of fear. He was her former boss, she worked for him, he knew that she was already married. He dealt drugs and guns and most probably he smuggled this stuff with the workers, but she didn’t mention any of this to me because she was terrified. Her appearance when she returned to the convent showed lack of sleep, and her reaction when anyone would only just knock on the door, told us that she was terrified. That, plus, the fact that Hamam was monitoring the convent constantly.”*

**CS “What did the sisters in the convent say about this whole situation?”**

Sister *“She was not interacting with anyone. We would go see her, serve her food, talk with her...etc. She was shaken and petrified, but then later Marina talked to us a lot about Hamam and his threats to us, her family. He even came to our home and threatened to kill my brother. Also, when this episode started, I used to work in a store to help dad out, but mom got sick and I had to leave work. Marina told me that that was a good thing, because Hamam was plotting to send people to set me up and get me in real trouble, as to make me feel intimidated or threatened. Since then, I am unable to go back to work. I am still afraid.”*



### *Abduction from the convent*

**CS** “We understand that Marina is no longer in the convent, can you explain what happened?”

Sister “Hamam sent a taxi on Christmas eve (January 6<sup>th</sup> for the Coptic Church) with an unveiled woman who pretended to be a Christian visiting the monastery. She found Marina standing near the church, so they took her and left, the convent doesn’t have cameras, only at the gates, so we do not know who took her and where to.”

**CS** “Did the nuns contact your family to tell you that your sister has disappeared again?”

Sister “Yes, they called me and said Marina is not here, a taxi came and picked her up.”

**CS** “After she left the convent again, did you have any contact with Marina?”

Sister “No, none. Because she told me, after her initial disappearance, before she returned (to the convent), she would ask if she could call us, making sure we were okay, but they would threaten her, saying that if they found out she tried to contact us, she will regret it. They made her too afraid to try to talk to us.”

### *Organized disappearances and conversions*

Sister “Marina told me that they took her to stay at the house of a salafi sheikh who has a villa in Alexandria dedicated to hiding kidnapped Christian girls. That guy, she was so terrified of and she said to us, please don’t announce my return because if that man finds out I am gone, he will kill me.”

“She also told us that the National Security police officers receive calls from people with gulf Arabic accents (donors from wealthy Gulf states) who get angry when they hear a girl was returned to her family. One call she attended, she overheard the officers reply saying: don’t worry, we return her with the right hand but we know how to bring her back with the left. So, they gave us Marina knowing they will take her back.”

Sister “Anyone who marries a Christian woman, they pay him. I don’t know how much, but Hamam was broke and all of a sudden, he is now a millionaire. He owns two banquet halls and rides in the latest model cars.”

**CS** “You told us that Hamam may have taken four women in total?”

Sister “Two months ago I was talking to the priest and he told me that there are 4 girls targeted by Hamam. He didn’t take them yet but was threatening and blackmailing them. Father said that we’re trying to rescue them from him any way we can. Recently here have been two cases. We were having a prayer meeting at church and the priest’s wife said let us pray for the two who have been taken by Hamam but they didn’t mention names. Hamam is a very well-known person in our church community that we’re suffering from dearly.”

## ❖ The Case of Simone (22), Quina

Simone was married at 19 years of age. Shortly after marriage, she started to fall into depression which made her married life unstable. In 2023, she left her husband for 3 months and stayed with her family who noticed her mental health was unstable, so they had her see a doctor. She was diagnosed with severe depression and bipolar disorder.

### *Disappearance*

Sister *“On November 13<sup>th</sup> at 4:30 PM, we received a call from my sister’s husband who told us that she did not come home. We looked for her in all the surrounding areas without avail. We then went to the police station in Quina and her husband filed a police report that his wife had disappeared.”*

**CS “Was he allowed to report her disappearance?”**

Sister *“Yes, he was.”*

Sister *“My family also wanted to file a police report, but the police at first refused that, because her husband had already done so. That is when they suggested we go the Academy of Islamic Research of Al Azhar, you know, see if she changed her papers or not (meaning a religious conversion, CS).”*

**CS “What happened when you went to Al Azhar?”**

Sister *“They refused to give us any information and they said that we needed a warrant to ask for data. They also told us that only because we looked like people who did not want trouble, they would let us go without further problems, something like that. We felt intimidated.”*

*Note: What happened at Al Azhar, what was said to Simone’s family, implies they could be reported for trying to spy, get information, which would get them in legal trouble. For more information on these types of tactics, see the report on corruption by officials in Egypt.*

### *Christian identity*

**CS “Another thing, was it known, or is it clear that Simone is a Coptic girl? That she was a Christian and not a Muslim?”**

Sister *“Yes, it shows, because we look different. We Christians don’t dress the same as Muslims. For example, Simone showed her hair and was not wearing a veil; she had a (Coptic, CS) cross tattoo on her hand. Also, we look different. Our features and our appearance give us away, that we are Christians. For example, we wear jeans and sometimes long or short blouses. They (Muslim girls, CS) wear scarves, niqabs, and skirts. Even if one of them would wears pants, they would be baggy, not showing their figure. It is obvious in Egypt what Christians look like and what Muslims look like, but the biggest thing is that we show our hair.”*

**CS** “In your area, where you live, are there any Muslim women that show their hair?”

Sister “In Quina? I haven’t seen any. In Cairo, maybe, but they are typically public figures, TV personalities (or women from a higher class, CS).”

### *Taking advantage of vulnerabilities*

**CS** “Forgive me, but we need to ask, was there any indication of marital problems between Simone and her husband that the family knew about? “

Sister “There were, yes, at first when she got married, things were okay, but a year later problems started. She then returned to our family home, and while she was back with us, we noticed she was not emotionally stable. We took her to see the doctor, and they told us that Simone was having mental health problems.”

**CS** “So, she went to see the doctor, you say, what did the doctor say exactly she was suffering from?”

Sister “They told us that she suffered from a bipolar disorder.”

Simone’s sister continues her story:

Sister “When we went to file the report, they kept telling us that she’s not the first to disappear and that many girls disappear. They actually refused to file a police report until we sent faxes to our legal counsel, so they called my mom back and allowed her to file a disappearance report. She gave them the number of the person who was in touch with my sister and gave them Simone’s picture (for identification, CS).”

**CS** “She was in contact with someone, you say?”

Sister “Yes, we were suspicious about a man that her husband said Simone was in touch with (on social media), but we don’t know more details about that. These were mere suspicions, we did not know anything for sure. “

**CS** “Is this something that your sister did before, disappear just like that, or is it something out of her character according to you?”

Sister “No, Simone had never done this before. So, the next day after her disappearance, we went to the doctor and tried to get a report from her, but she refused. We tried to understand from her whether Simone knew and approved of what happened, if this was her own decision.”

**CS** “So, her relationship with the family was good, given the fact that when she walked away from her husband, she went back to her family. Therefore, regarding her disappearance and the complete absence of contact since, we could argue that Simone didn’t want to contact her husband, but it is strange that she never contacted her family?”

Sister *“Also because she was unstable, mentally I mean, someone must have helped her to do this. Maybe she could run away on her own, but she could definitely not have stayed away for such a long time, without any help. She has no money of her own and needs to live off something.”*

*Note: Again, we see a young Coptic woman who is vulnerable because of her gender, her religious identity and the mental health problem she has, is being approached, secretly, by someone without her family or husband knowing.*

### **Current situation**

**CS “Please, continue, Simone’s family and her husband both went to the police to report her disappearance?”**

Sister *“Yes.”*

**CS “How did things evolve from there, did her husband or your family receive a call from Simone or someone else with regard to her disappearance?”**

Sister *“No there is no news whatsoever. Nothing even to tell us whether she’s alive or dead.”*

**CS “To be clear, was there also no news of a conversion to Islam, either online or directly to you? Do you have the police report or the case ID?”**

Sister *“The report my mom filed, we could not get, they would not give it to us.”*

**CS “And there has not been any news, since she disappeared?”**

Sister *“No, I just want our voice to be heard, to tell people what happened. I want to know my sister’s whereabouts, where she is, whether she’s dead or alive.”*

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<sup>1</sup> Mohammed Hegazy was the first ever Egyptian Muslim convert to Christianity to try to take the legal route to change his religion on the national ID card by launching a lawsuit in 2007. The lawsuit was put on hold indefinitely (until the constitutionality of the body to make that decision was reviewed) and in 2013 he was arrested as a foreign reporter, jailed in Dec 2013 and regularly tortured. Originally sentenced to 5 years but after appealing, was to be released in Dec 2014. He then was accused in a blasphemy and disturbance of the peace case and was jailed until Aug 2016 after making a statement that he was no longer a Christian (under duress to be released). <https://www.prisoneralert.com/prisoners/241/mohammed-hegazy>