Abstract
This paper will examine how we can apply the concept of resilience used in the discipline of international development and social sciences to the situation of Christians in persecution, with a particular focus on women in the church under pressure. I will first focus on the theoretical conceptualization, followed by a possible application of components of resilience to the church under pressure. What aspects do we have to look at? And how can the church be strengthened? The paper is written with a focus on places where Christians live under pressure, the case study is taken from the Egyptian context.

Key words:
Resilience, church, transformation, drivers of risk, enabling environment, anticipation, absorption and adaptation, women.

Context
The Christian minority in Egypt face a high level of vulnerability due to oppression and discrimination as researched and documented by a number of organisations. This oppression takes many forms such as harassment on the street, kidnappings leading to forced marriage and/or forced change of religion, lacking or poor education, and discrimination when starting a business. One of the reasons behind the oppression is the fact that they are regarded as belonging to an “infidel” outcast population.
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Within these persecuted minorities, women are the most oppressed. Women of religious minorities have to deal with oppression allowed by the state and with the much more real, and always present, world of traditional, cultural and religious customs and values.

Case study Strength to Stand community group in Cairo.

Let me introduce Mariam, living in Ezbeth el Nakhl (garbage city dwellers) in Cairo. She attends the Strength to Stand group meeting weekly and got to know other women living in her neighbourhood, something she had not managed before due to many domestic chores. Her husband often beat Mary when he arrived home, frustrated because he could not make ends meet and facing discrimination as a day labourer. One time the beating was so severe that her arm was broken and her husband sent her to live with another family member leaving her in a desperate situation. So, how could Mariam be supported?

At a certain time Mariam participated in a discussion on forgiveness and realised herself that it is important to forgive. She decided to forgive her husband and to move back into his family home again. It is still difficult but due to the change in her behaviour the mood in the home improved considerably. Life did not become easier but now she leads the family in prayer and shares God’s love and care, her husband also learned to control his temper. Her resilience to deal with pressures in life as a Christian woman has grown. She is aware of her own value and has grown in self-esteem and confidence. Due to the capacity building received she is now considering taking a loan from the revolving group fund to start an income generating activity.

Resilience

Mariam grew in her resilience, but what do we mean when we use this term? Resilience has become an important term in the language of many disciplines. The concept is used in international development papers, social sciences and others. This paper will investigate how we can apply the concept of resilience used in the discipline of international development to the situation of Christian women in persecution.

I will first focus on the theoretical conceptualization looking at the following model and definition developed by DFID: Resilience is the “ability to anticipate, avoid, plan for, cope with, recover from and adapt to shocks and stresses”. Looking at resilience in detail we see that it can be broken down into four components, namely anticipation, absorption, adaptation and transformation. Transformation is an overarching approach and process that reshapes and enhances capacities of resilience.

Once these capacities of resilience are strengthened and “if drivers of risks are reduced then resilience increases given that these actions are supported by an enabling environment”. Drivers of risks are behavioural and (in)formal systems through which pressure and persecution flares up and increases. The enabling environment could be the physical environment such as access to land but also societal norms, power relations, institutional systems and markets. These aspects mentioned will be applied to the church under pressure.

Building Resilience and Building the Church under Pressure - practical steps

We now will make an effort to link these aspects of resilience to building the church under pressure, in practice these aspects will overlap with each other as will be shown. In the context of this consultation the focus will be particularly on Christian women as within these persecuted and oppressed minorities, women are the most oppressed.

How could the aspect of anticipation take place through community groups such as the Strength to Stand (S2S) group where Mariam belongs to? Once the S2S groups have grown strong they could start to discuss and adopt pro-active measures like guiding children to avoid places of oppression or instructing young women not to linger around in the street on the way home from school because that is where they are more likely to be groomed by Muslim men. The church could reduce the impact of persecution by looking at prevention and being pro-active. Moreover, training Christians not to antagonize unnecessarily and strengthening cooperation among and within churches in order to support everyone. They can follow trends within their own community, keep track of legal court cases and their outcomes, and map events and developments.

The second component of resilience is to absorb shocks such as the recent attacks on the Coptic church in Alexandria. To absorb shocks is possible through a strong identity in Christ,
An inclusive society where Christians can thrive

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Role of church in society

As shown, we also need to look at the drivers of risks and the environment people live in. Drivers of Risks could be addressed through lobby and advocacy if and when women living under pressure come together and jointly address issues of oppression and discrimination. Complemented by international pressure needed to keep governments accountable to their promise to uphold the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The environment Christian communities live in could be positively influenced by Christians if they participate in local governance and if they develop lesson plans for educational institutions focussing on tolerance and acceptance. Societal norms and institutional systems could be influenced when Christians take places of authority and pro-actively create an enabling environment where everybody is allowed to thrive.
If we visualize this, we come to the following overview:

1.
2.
3.

**Conclusion**

The above shows an effort to adapt a concept of resilience to churches living under pressure and in particular Christian women within these churches. We have seen that all aspects of resilience need to be addressed at different levels leading to a process of transformation. Resources could be provided to build capacity and skills of Christian women to lift them out of poverty and to strengthen their confidence. In addition the church could be pro-active in such a way that they will be able to influence drivers of risks and the enabling environment. Most important of all: they will be able to involve the whole body of Christ to join hands in prayer.

**References**


