

Open Doors

MAGAZINE | March/April 2026

**Now you
see me.**

**Soon you
won't?**

See change before it's too late.

Ariana's* brother threatened to kill her for following Jesus. As an Afghan convert from Islam, she is very vulnerable. As a woman, she is even more at risk.


Around the world, persecutors are trying to erase Christian women – from public spaces, from the workplace, from their countries and even from the world. Will you help women like Ariana see change before it's too late?

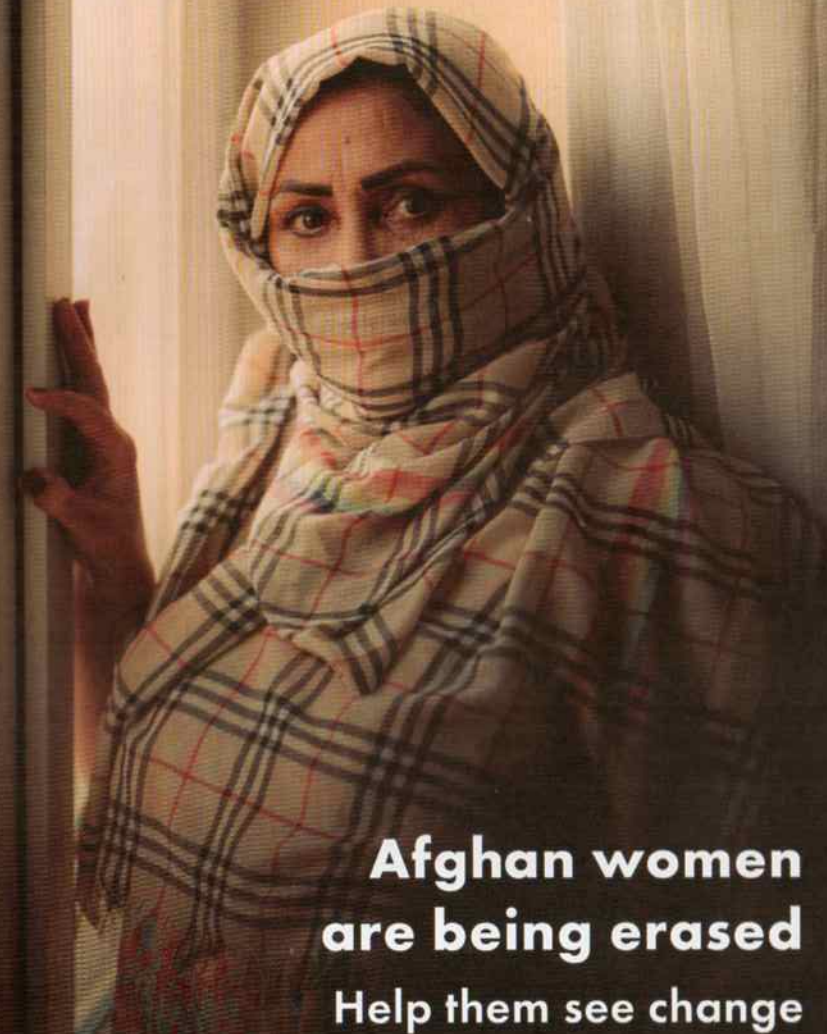
Every £28 could provide vital food aid and medicine to a woman and her family who have fled extreme persecution.

Visit opendoorsuk.org to make your gift today or phone **01993 460015**. Thank you.

**Name changed for security reasons*

PERSECUTED WOMEN SEE. CHANGE.

 **Open Doors**



**Afghan women
are being erased**
Help them see change

ORDER YOUR WORLD WATCH LIST 2026 TOP 50

Discover expert information, prayer requests and stories of impossible faith from the top 50 countries on the World Watch List.

Order your free *World Watch List Top 50* and be part of God's impossible plan for our brothers and sisters who follow Jesus no matter the cost.

Order today: opendoorsuk.org/wwl



MRS PILATE'S SERVING GIRL

This Easter, you can gently introduce the children in your life to their persecuted church family – while enjoying a funny, thought-provoking retelling of the Easter story.

Order your free copy of Mrs Pilate's Serving Girl at opendoorsuk.org/pilate

LEAVE A LEGACY OF HOPE

You can give your persecuted family hope of a brighter future by including a gift to Open Doors in your Will. Your gift will mean a lifetime of support for those who suffer for following Jesus.

If you have not yet made a Will, you can make one for FREE using our partner *Farewill*.

To find out more, go to opendoorsuk.org/legacy or phone 01993 460015.



Open Doors is an international ministry serving persecuted Christians and churches worldwide.

Open Doors supplies Bibles, leadership training, literacy programmes, livelihood support and advocacy services. We also mobilise the church in the UK and Ireland to serve Christians living under religious persecution.

If you have any questions about the work of Open Doors, or would like to reprint any of the articles in this magazine, please do get in touch.

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COVER: Even when they flee their country, Afghan Christian women still face persecution. Read more on p8.

*Names changed for security reasons

LETTER FROM HENRIETTA

Seen and loved

"Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace." LUKE 8:48

Earlier this year, I was able to speak directly to a roomful of MPs, sharing with them the reality of Christian persecution (p6). As a Christian woman, there are many countries around the world where having that stage, and that opportunity, would be unthinkable.

In Afghanistan, for example, women are not allowed to speak in public at all. Many are effectively under house arrest, held behind towering walls. Women can't be seen – and they can't see out. If that's how life is for a Muslim Afghan woman, think how unbearable it is for a Christian convert. Behind those walls, she is likely to face every form of persecution, violence and subjugation.

Afghanistan is at one end of the spectrum, but it isn't an outlier. Across the globe, millions of our Christian sisters face erasure from the workplace, from the public sphere and, sometimes, from life altogether.

What a contrast we see in Jesus! I love the passage quoted above, from Luke 8, where Jesus heals a woman who has been subject to bleeding for 12 years. She was fearful and wanted to be blessed without drawing attention to herself. But Jesus saw her. He called her 'daughter'. He commended her faith and He sent her home in peace.

This is my prayer for women like Ariana* from Afghanistan (p8), and so many of our sisters around the world. That each woman or girl would really understand – whatever the cultural norms that allow persecution to go unnoticed – that God sees her, celebrates her, and loves her as a cherished daughter.

Today, we can help and uphold these courageous women. Your support and prayers are crucial. The battle is fierce and the problem is often hidden from the world's eyes – but, together, we can see change.

Every blessing,



Henrietta

Henrietta Blyth
CEO, Open Doors UK&I

WORLD WATCH LIST BULLETIN



NIGERIA
Pastor Barnabas' new home

Thanks to you, Pastor Barnabas and his family in Nigeria have a new home!

When we first introduced you to the family, they were living in a tent no bigger than the size of a double mattress – but not any more.

"I want to appreciate God Almighty for where He has kept me today."

"I want to appreciate God Almighty for where He has kept me today," says the pastor. "This is a new house for my family. We can freely move inside. We even have chairs, tables and wall curtains. I have a personal room with my wife. I have a room for my children. We have a kitchen, and a toilet and water system. We can easily cook even when it is raining."

Your support is helping the family in other ways – three of his children now attend school and his wife, a designer, has a shop.

However, the need across Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa continues to be huge, with millions of others still displaced and without a home. That's why the *Arise Africa* campaign remains so crucial.

"Pray for Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa," asks Pastor Barnabas. "May God heal our lands."

Step inside Pastor Barnabas' new home at opendoorsuk.org/videos



UK

Hiking up support

A group of 15 young adults raised £830 for our persecuted family after hiking the steep, rocky hills of Box Hill and Westhumble in Surrey.

Full Hearts London and Teleios Community joined forces for the event, which covered 4.8 miles and took four hours. Lois Forbes, founder of Full Hearts London, said that the faith and testimonies of the persecuted church inspired them 'to do something for them and to be more bold in our own faith'.

"I gave each person a country to pray for on the hike," she continues. "Even though we may never meet those we're raising money for and praying for, this is how the body of Christ should be – taking action for one another."

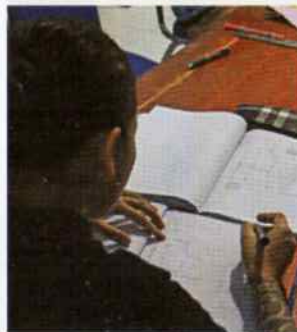
Could you raise funds for your persecuted family by taking on a challenge? Go to opendoorsuk.org/fundraising to get started.



INDONESIA

Sewing hope for Diana

You're helping rebuild the life of a woman in Indonesia who was rejected by her family after she encountered Jesus in prison.



After a troubling few years at home, Diana (ABOVE) turned to drugs and working in bars, and ended up in prison. Through a prison ministry team, she became a Christian.

"I prayed for a miracle – that I would be released early. And God did it. From an eight-year sentence, my time was reduced, and with good behaviour, I served 18 months," she says.

On release, her family rejected her when she refused to renounce her faith. "What matters is that I have Jesus" she says.

Today, Diana is rebuilding her life at the Women Training Centre (WTC), run by Open Doors partners, where she's learning to sew. "I truly enjoy it. I had never even

before. I hope to use this skill, so I never have to go back to the nightlife again."

PRAY That Diana will heal from her past and grow in her faith and skills.

YEMEN

Crackdown on believers

Christians in Yemen are facing an unprecedented crackdown, with more than 50 believers detained since the beginning of the year.

Threats against Christians are circulating on social media and through physical flyers. It seems that new alliances are joining forces to continue the crackdown on 'infidel' Christians in Yemen, which is third on the World Watch List.

"Most of the people that I was always in contact with are now imprisoned," shares an Open Doors partner.

PRAY For an end to this crackdown and strength for the church.

IRAN

Christians amongst killed protestors

Christians are among protestors killed by security forces amidst the unrest that's broken out in Iran. The protests were sparked by economic pressures, but have turned into a national movement calling for deeper change.

At the time of writing, at least seven Iranian-Armenian Christians have lost their lives, with others injured. At least one convert has been arrested.

"Iranian Christians view the current situation through a strong commitment to justice, human dignity and peace," says an Open Doors local source. "This is shaped both by their lived experience of marginalisation and by Christian ethics emphasising non-violence and love of one's neighbour."

PRAY For God's light to shine through the church in Iran.

More stories

- Attack foiled in Syria
- Chinese church closed
- "You wiped away our tears" – crucial aid in DRC



Head to opendoorsuk.org/news or follow us @[opendoorsuk](https://twitter.com/opendoorsuk) for more news and updates



THANK YOU! A RECORD 113 MPS ATTEND WORLD WATCH LIST 2026 LAUNCH

As MPs heard stories from Iran, Syria and Somalia, they saw the horrors faced by our persecuted family – and how they can raise their voice for them. Thank you for inviting your MP.

Imprisonment in Iran, a bomb attack in Syria, a house church targeted by Islamist militants in Somalia – these are the powerful, first-hand testimonies of persecuted Christians heard by a record 113 MPs at the World Watch List parliamentary launch on 14 January.

Like previous years, MPs were inundated with your requests to attend, with 6,828 online invitations reaching 644 MPs – that’s almost every MP in the UK and Ireland. Many more of you sent a postcard invite.

“A MOMENT FOR NIGERIA”

This year’s event was hosted by Ruth Jones MP. She opened proceedings before handing over to Henrietta Blyth, Open Doors UK & Ireland CEO, who provided an overview of the report’s latest findings.

“It was really eye-opening to hear some of the real persecution that’s going on. If we don’t ascribe to religious freedom, we are going to be seeing the entire world suffer as a result.”

Escalating persecution in sub-Saharan Africa was a key focus, accounting for 14 of the countries in the top 50. Henrietta said the region is ‘a deathtrap for Christians’, whilst expressing relief that people are finally talking about what’s going on in Nigeria. David Smith MP, the UK Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief, touched upon this later, saying, “Now is a moment for Nigeria.”

In an interview with journalist Nitya Rajan, Aweis, a Somali believer, shared his story

and Islamist militants, and urged MPs to use their good relationship with Somalia to advocate for those suffering for their faith.

STORIES FROM SYRIA AND IRAN

Syria was another focus, after it jumped 12 places to sixth on the World Watch List, largely due to a surge in violence. MPs were shown a powerful film featuring footage and survivors of the suicide bomb attack on at Saint Elias Church, Damascus, that killed 22 people.

“Christians around the world are under threat and many countries are increasing in their violence and suppression of Christianity. We must bear witness and stand with them and anyone else who is persecuted for their faith.”

– Sorcha Eastwood MP

Iran was also covered, with the country dominating the headlines at the time amidst widespread unrest,



adding to the vulnerability of Christians. Speaking to Nitya Rajan, Bahar* from Iran told MPs, “Every single day, I’m fearing for Christians in the country.”

SPEAK UP AND PRAY

“We have to be a voice that speaks on these horrendous stories,” David Smith MP told his counterparts. “No one should live in fear because of their faith or belief. The minimum we can do is speak up and I urge you to that.”

The sentiment was shared by many MPs at the event, including Jim Shannon MP, who sends the World Watch List to all churches in his constituency and the local mosque. He expressed his thanks to those who invited him to the launch, adding, “I urge fervent and frequent prayer, because faith can move mountains.”

Henrietta closed the event with a series of requests to the government around raising violations of freedom of religion or belief, building conversations about religious freedom into discussions on other issues, speaking publicly when silence would be easier, acting early in fragile states and ensuring the authority and effectiveness of the Special Envoy role.

“When opportunities to protect the persecuted are not taken, silence is not neutral – it is read as permission,” she concluded.

“As I read the reports that more than 388 million Christians face high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith, I am reminded of the importance of defending freedom of religion and belief, which is a priority for me and for many of my constituents.”

– Rt Hon. John Glen MP

THANK YOU!

“Thank you so much for all you’ve done to get your MPs to come to the launch,” Henrietta said in a video of the launch, which you can watch at [opendoorsuk.org/videos](https://www.opendoorsuk.org/videos), where you can also discover if your MP attended the event.

All MPs at the launch were given a copy of the advocacy report, called *Striking at the Foundations*. Whether or not your MP was there, could you ensure they get their hands on this? Send today at [opendoorsuk.org/advocacy](https://www.opendoorsuk.org/advocacy). Thank you!





Now you
see me

How persecution is erasing
women like Ariana

Ariana's* phone rang. She saw that it was her brother, Ahmad*, from back in Afghanistan. It had been a long time since she'd heard from him. Nervously, she answered.

Without a pause, Ahmad launched into a vicious verbal attack: "I heard that you sold your religion and became a Christian," he said. "If your husband's family are pressuring you, I will come and save you. But if you really sold your religion, I am willing to sell the carpet under my feet to come and kill you."

That was his ultimatum. He was ready to 'rescue' her – but he was also ready to kill her.

POWERLESS

As an Afghan woman, Ariana* has almost no rights. She is considered the property of her husband, father, brother or other male relatives. As a convert to Christianity, this powerlessness becomes something much more dangerous. She could be killed at any moment. Worse than that, her family and community would consider her murder just and right. In Ahmad's words, it would be viewed as 'clearing this stain of dishonour from our people'.

The erasing of Christian women around the world takes many different forms. In Ariana's case, it could mean being literally erased from the world. Her choice to follow Jesus is the most dangerous decision she ever made.

THE FIRST DEATH THREAT

But even before Ariana became a Christian, her brother dominated and threatened her. "In my neighbourhood, the men were like dictators," Ariana remembers. "Whatever the men said, the women had to obey. Girls had no freedom. I suffered a lot because of this. I always thought I was like an eagle and had to fly away from there – because I had a strong sense of freedom within me."

The oppression of women affects the most fundamental aspects of everyday life. "In Afghanistan, women did not have the right to choose their spouse," Ariana says. "Where I lived, women didn't have the right to choose their education."

"Whatever the men said, the women had to obey. Girls had no freedom."

Despite these strictures, Ariana fell in love with Bashir*, a young man in her village. Her aunt discovered a love letter that Bashir had written her – and their secret was out. It was an affront to the men in her family that she hadn't waited for them to choose her future husband.

"When my aunt took the letter, all my tribe found out that I was in love," she says, "so my brother came to the door

of the house with a big knife, wanting to kill me.”

To quell the scandal, Ariana’s family quickly married her off to Bashir. Little did they know that this was her first step towards finding Jesus.

SECRET CHRISTIANS

When Ariana married Bashir, she didn’t know that he and his family were undercover Christians. She didn’t even know what a Christian was. “I had no idea there was another religion other than Islam, called Christianity,” she says. “Any non-Muslim was just called ‘infidel’ in our house.”

Ariana’s new in-laws were converts from Islam and had

to keep their faith secret, because it opened them up to extraordinary dangers. The Taliban will execute anybody discovered to be a Christian, and have gone door-to-door to root out believers. Others in the community may take matters into their own hands, killing converts to preserve so-called ‘honour’.

“My brother came to the door of the house with a big knife.”

Tragically, this is what happened to Ariana’s new family. Someone had

discovered their secret. “A grenade was thrown into our house at 2am,” says Ariana. “My brother-in-law was killed. He was killed because he was a Christian.”

At the time, Ariana thought it must be because of his government job. It wasn’t until the family had fled Afghanistan that she learned the truth.

REFUGEES IN CENTRAL ASIA

When the Taliban took over Afghanistan in 2021, thousands fled. Among them were many of the country’s Christian population. Even before the takeover, being a Christian in Afghanistan was extremely dangerous – and now, as the murder of Ariana’s brother-in-law showed all too painfully, their lives were at serious risk every day.

“We were no longer safe in our own country, so we became refugees in another country,” says Ariana. It was there, in Central Asia, that the family shared their secret faith with Ariana: “My father-in-law said very kindly, ‘We want you to become a Christian, as we go to church. Do you want to?’”

Though it was the first time she had heard about Christianity, she agreed to go to church with them. She explains: “I loved my husband very much, and I wanted to follow my husband.”

FOLLOWING JESUS

In church, Ariana began to

shocked by how different He is from the god she had been taught about in her strict Muslim upbringing.

“God was shown to us as something terrifying,” she says. “There was only fear. When I understood how much oppression and pressure Afghan Muslim women lived under – how one man could have as many wives as he wanted and use them as slaves – it helped me see the truth that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life.”

“As an Afghan Christian refugee in Central Asia, the danger is constant.”

Today, Ariana and her family still live in Central Asia. They are safe from the immediate violence of Afghanistan and the Taliban – but as refugees, and as converts from Islam, they are still at significant risk.

Thankfully, there hasn’t been any follow-up to the death threat Ariana received from her brother. But that is only one of many dangers.

“THE DANGER IS CONSTANT”

“As an Afghan Christian refugee in Central Asia, the danger is constant,” Ariana says. “We live under the stress of being deported at any moment because we don’t have a legal identity

WWL 11

What is life like for Christian women in Afghanistan?

AYDIN*, OPEN DOORS PARTNER IN THE REGION

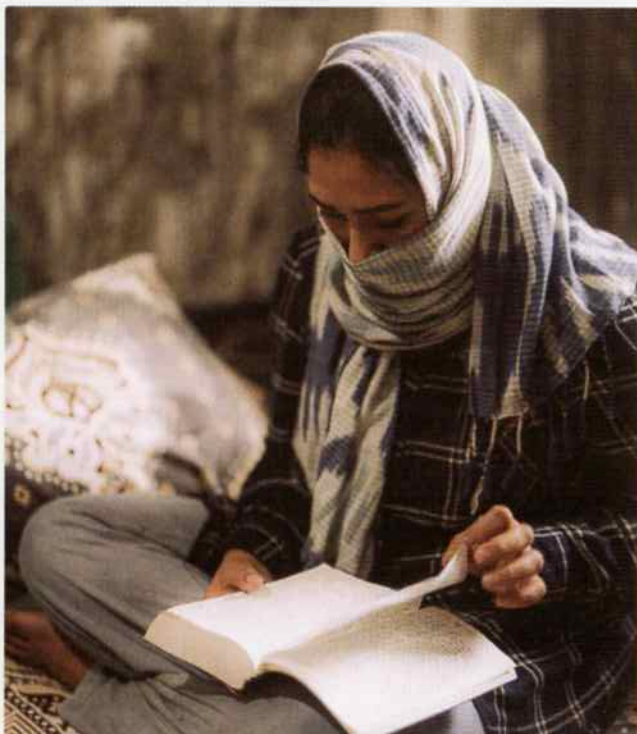
AYDIN: “All Afghan women face restrictions on their rights – but the cost is even higher for the women who have chosen to follow Jesus. Christian women living in Afghanistan are some of the most marginalised people in the world.

“Afghan girls cannot attend secondary school. As a result, teenage girls in Afghanistan are often forced into marriage at a very young age. Women are not allowed to leave their homes without a ‘mahram’ – a male guardian. They are expected to interact only with men who are relatives, and only in their own homes.

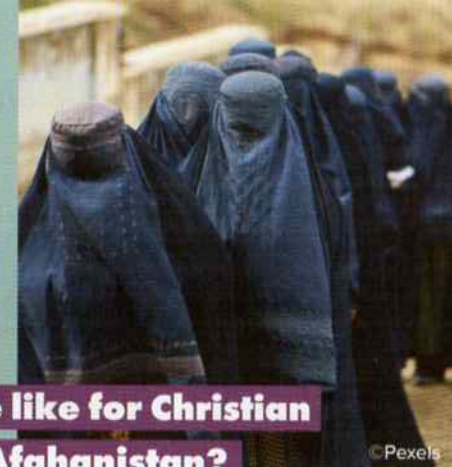
“Therefore, Afghan women are forced to remain indoors, exclusively engaged in housework, with no recreational activities. If they do go outside, laws passed in August 2024 dictate that a woman’s full face and

“Women are now unable to receive qualified care, including medical care, because only women are permitted to help them – and there are few female doctors or other care workers. Poor women, now banned from working, are forced to seek food by begging – especially if they are widows. Yet, many of these women previously held respectable professions – teachers, doctors and scientists.

“Add to this the additional vulnerability of secretly following Jesus, and the position of Christian women in Afghanistan has largely become incompatible with daily life. If a Christian woman’s religious identity is exposed, she will likely be executed, as well as her family members. Their only survival opportunity forces them to hide their faith or flee the country with their Christian families. Please keep praying for our



When Ariana became a Christian, her brother threatened to kill her



©Pexels

our faith or the Word of God, we could be deported. That's our biggest fear – being sent back, especially since everyone knows that we have become Christians."

Deportation would be a death sentence. As the threat from Ahmad shows, the family – especially the women – would be instant targets for extreme violence. But even while living Central Asia, Ariana faces daily hazards.

"The three main pressures focus on the vulnerabilities of being a refugee, being female and being a Christian," explains Aydin, an Open Doors local partner who supports Afghan refugees in Central Asia. "Refugees – both male and female – can be exploited

by the local population, but women face additional vulnerability. This can result in exploitation: for instance, an Afghan woman may have to fulfil additional requirements or pay more money to find a place to live."

"I want other Afghans to also taste this salt of life."

Aydin continues: "If it is known that an Afghan woman is Christian, she is vulnerable to blackmail and the threat of being exposed. If deported, and if it was known that she had fled Afghanistan as a Christian – especially if she converted from Islam – her

conversion would likely result in execution. If she manages to escape execution, she will enter a world where women are virtually confined to their homes."

LIVING WATER

Despite the danger, Ariana's faith is her anchor. She has a heart to help other women like her, and boldly shares the truth of Jesus' love with other refugees.

"I was raised in a very restrictive society, so I want other Afghans to also taste this salt of life and to drink this living water," she says. "I share the Word of God with many Afghan families. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus says, 'Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.' This motivates me because I consider it a duty that I must do."

Open Doors partners support Ariana in her vital ministry. Through local believers like Ariana, Open Doors also helps refugees with practical aid, discipleship materials and spiritual training – building up a new generation of Afghan believers who risk everything to follow Jesus.

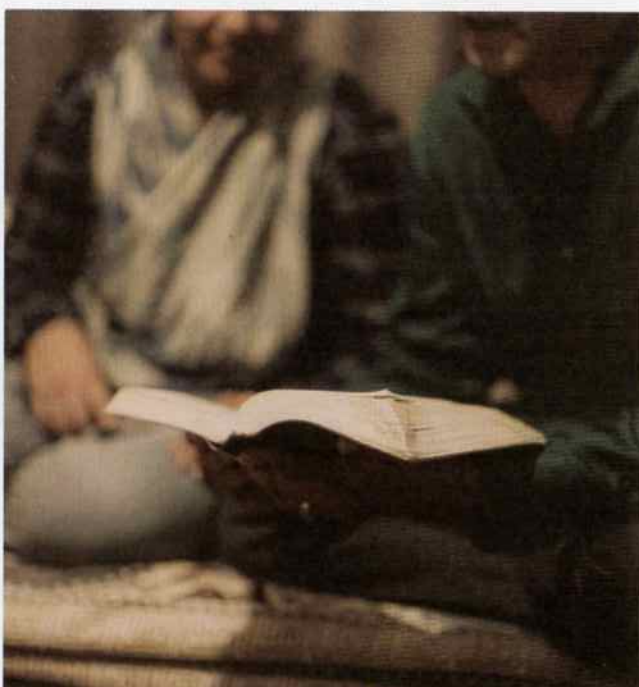
Her ministry is particularly transformative for the women she serves – women who have spent years being told they have no freedoms, no identity, no purpose. Women whom persecutors long to erase. "All the women I meet with say the same thing," says Ariana. "They thank me and tell me: 'When you come, we feel at peace.' I truly believe God sends us to be



As Christian refugees in Central Asia, Ariana and her family still face many challenges.

Watch Ariana's story at opendoorsuk.org/videos

Ariana and her husband minister to other Afghan refugees



SEE CHANGE FOR WOMEN LIKE ARIANA

Around the world, in every moment, Christian women like Ariana risk erasure. They are forced to disappear from schools and universities, from the workplace, from public life – and perhaps even from the world altogether.

Today, you can help bring about the vision shared by Ariana and Open Doors: that every woman who is persecuted for her faith and gender is seen, valued and empowered to reach her God-given potential. You can help reverse erasure. You can help women see change.

PLEASE PRAY

- For Ariana and her family to be protected from violence, and for Ariana's ministry to be blessed
- For Open Doors partners in the region to hear God's guidance as they take risks to serve vulnerable believers
- That every Christian woman would be seen, valued and empowered to reach her God-given potential.

PLEASE GIVE

Every £18 could give Bibles to two women from a country where God's Word is not easy to access.

Every £28 could provide vital food aid and medicine to a woman and her family who have fled extreme persecution

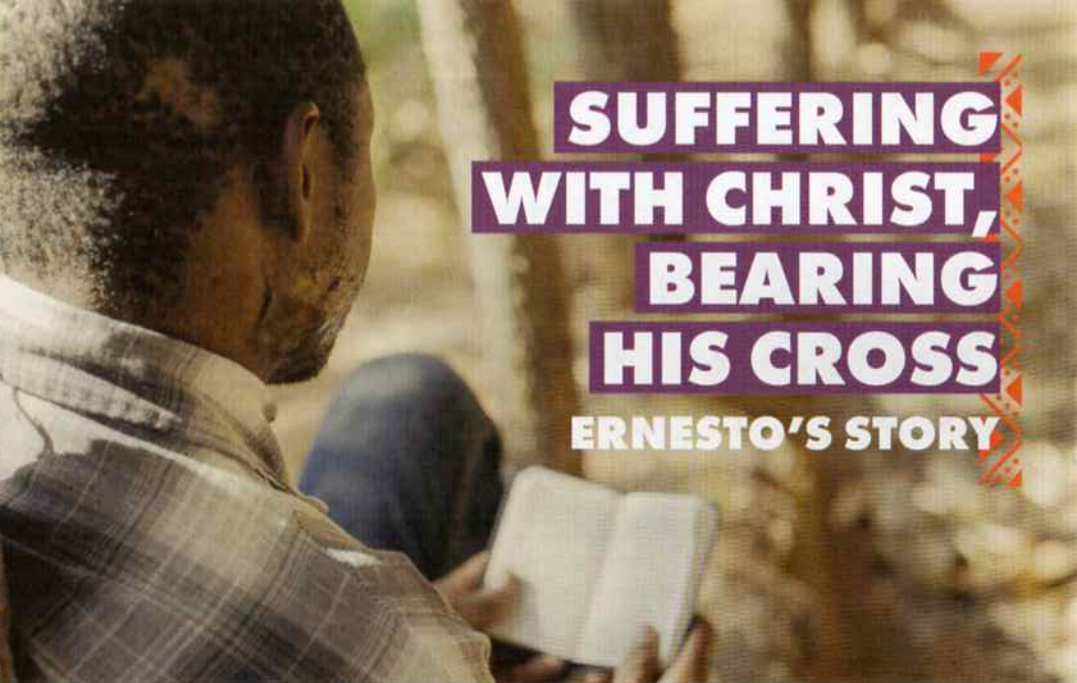
Every £52 could help give persecution survival training to a vulnerable woman.

PRAYER BREAKFAST

You can also pray for persecuted Christian women by hosting a prayer breakfast. Download our step-by-step guide, featuring the *Tears of Gold* resource and stories

from women like Ariana, at opendoorsuk.org/seechange





SUFFERING WITH CHRIST, BEARING HIS CROSS

ERNESTO'S STORY

Please be aware that this story contains details of persecution that readers may find particularly distressing.

The violence that Nigerian Christians face is finally being talked about, as eyes around the world have turned to the country. But Nigeria is not an isolated case: violence is overwhelming communities across sub-Saharan Africa, and there are many stories of persecution that the world needs to hear.

One such story is that of a man called Ernesto* from Mozambique. For most of Ernesto's life, persecution was a distant worry. It was only when armed militants invaded his community that it took on a terrifying reality in his life, leaving scars, seen and unseen,

"I DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO ESCAPE"

Ernesto provided for his family by selling fish. He would travel to the beach near his house, buy fish from the local fishermen and return to sell it. It was a simple, contented life. But one day everything changed when over 100 extremists invaded his home.

"Their idea was to crucify me like Jesus."

"Between five and six in the afternoon, the terrorists arrived and started shooting," Ernesto recalls. "I tried to run, but I kept hearing gunshots. I didn't know how to escape."

A crescendo of shouts and the crackle of fires began to fill Ernesto's ears as he ran. However,

The militants loaded looted goods onto the backs of their captives. Ernesto couldn't bear the weight and collapsed. Unable to rise, the captors hit Ernesto's back and then ordered him to pray.

"I'M A CHRISTIAN"

"They said that I had to pray in Arabic so that I could carry the luggage. I said 'No, I am not a Muslim. I'm a Christian.'"

His captors were immediately roused. "Do you pray to Jesus? Are you a Christian?" they demanded. Ernesto refused to deny it and the extremists began to laugh. One then pulled out a knife and began to torture him – still he refused to deny his Saviour, the One who first suffered for him.

"They said, 'Since you are insisting on talking about Jesus, we will show you what

That was when the jihadists brought out long nails and a hammer.

"I COULD NOT EVEN DEFEND MYSELF"

Ernesto remembers each detail. "They looked for a large tree and cut a stake, nailed the stake to that tree so that it could serve as a cross," he says. "Their idea was to crucify me like Jesus."

His captors used nails and wires to tie Ernesto to the cross and set part of his body on fire. "I could not even defend myself."

"I'm feeling well because of the intervention of these brothers in Christ."

That seemed like the end for Ernesto. But God had other plans. During the whole ordeal, a couple

from the village were hiding nearby. When the jihadists departed, they darted out and extinguished the fire. They untied Ernesto and transported him to a nearby town where they reported everything to the police.

Ernesto was taken to hospital, still alive.

"I HAVE FORGIVEN THEM"

Initially, Ernesto's injuries rendered him paralysed. He spent 45 days in hospital before returning home to heal. The scars on his body were unignorable, as were the ones on his mind, but the God of resurrection life began to restore Ernesto. A local partner visited Ernesto and covered his medical bills, supporting him during his seven-month recovery period.

"They helped me, they prayed for me. I'm feeling well because of the intervention of these brothers in Christ", Ernesto says.

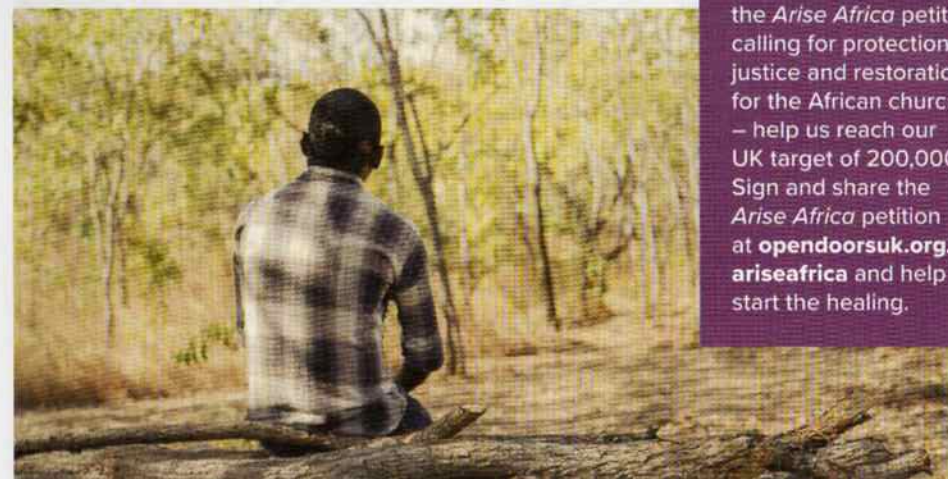
Despite all that he has experienced, he has known the love of God. He looks forward with faith, asking for your prayers: "I ask for prayers for my Northern Zone. Churches are unsafe. Many people are displaced."

He even looks on his persecutors with love, just as Jesus did. "I ask God to forgive these people," he says. "I don't hold any grudges against them. I've also forgiven them."

PLEASE PRAY:

- Praise God for Ernesto's unwavering faith
- That he would continue to heal
- That God would protect His church across sub-Saharan Africa in the face of violence.

OPPOSITE Ernesto's scars remain with him, but so does his trust in Jesus
BELOW Despite everything, Ernesto continues to find healing



HAVE YOU SIGNED YET?

More than 110,000 of you have already signed the *Arise Africa* petition, calling for protection, justice and restoration for the African church – help us reach our UK target of 200,000! Sign and share the *Arise Africa* petition at opendoorsuk.org/ariseafrica and help start the healing.



INTERVIEW: life for Christian women in Iran



Representative image

Bahar* is an Iranian Christian woman, now living outside the country. She shares her perspective on what life is like for women in Iran, and why they are vulnerable for both their gender and their faith.

Q. WHAT IS THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN IRAN?

BAHAR: The laws of Iran are based in Islam, and that means the role and place of women are dictated by Islamic law. All the laws

class. They cannot choose who or when they marry. Girls as young as nine are married off, often to wealthier older men, or in exchange for opportunities for the girl's father.

For education, working,

needs permission from her father or husband. In their absence, permission is required from a male relative – even her own son.

Maybe there are more opportunities for women in big cities – in education, for

rural areas, the subjugation of women is accepted in the culture. And this culture is supported by the law.

Q. HOW IS LIFE DIFFERENT FOR A CHRISTIAN WOMAN, COMPARED TO A MUSLIM WOMAN?

BAHAR: Being a woman in Iran is already severely limiting. Being a Christian adds to all of these pressures and vulnerabilities. A woman or girl must always have an answer when her husband or father asks: "What did you do today? Who did you meet?" That makes it very hard for them to explore faith or join a house church. If a wife or daughter converts and her family is Muslim – if they even suspect her of converting – then she will be forbidden from leaving the house.

There are dangers at work, too. I spoke to a nurse who prayed for a patient, then a colleague reported her to the police and she lost her job. Not just that, but it is now on her record that she was punished because of Christianity. She'll never get another job in the medical field.

Q. HOW DO THE POLICE TREAT CHRISTIAN WOMEN DIFFERENTLY?

BAHAR: A big difference is seen when a woman is arrested, perhaps for

All women can face threats of sexual violence in custody, but it is worse for Christian women. The police feel they have the right to treat the 'infidel' however they want.

Christian women face constant fear and trauma. I've spoken to many women who are affected by trauma emotionally and physically, but it has become so normalised that they don't realise it. They are persecuted to the point where they don't even recognise it as persecution.

Q. HOW DOES A CHRISTIAN WOMAN'S EXPERIENCE COMPARE TO A CHRISTIAN MAN'S?

BAHAR: In the past, maybe 20-30 years ago, there was more pressure on men. They were the ones teaching, evangelising, leading house churches – and they were the ones being arrested, because they were the most visible. But now, despite Christian women seeing and knowing the risks, we are seeing so many Christian women in Iran being the ones speaking out, leading churches and so forth. So now they are facing the same punishments as men. It used to be that a man would get ten years in prison, say, and a woman would only get two. But last year, a woman was sentenced to ten years. Things have changed.

The amazing thing about Christian women in Iran is that they know the challenges,

to house church, speak about their faith. They're so brave and so courageous. They cannot be silent about the value, peace and joy they have found in Jesus – and want other women in Iran to know, too.

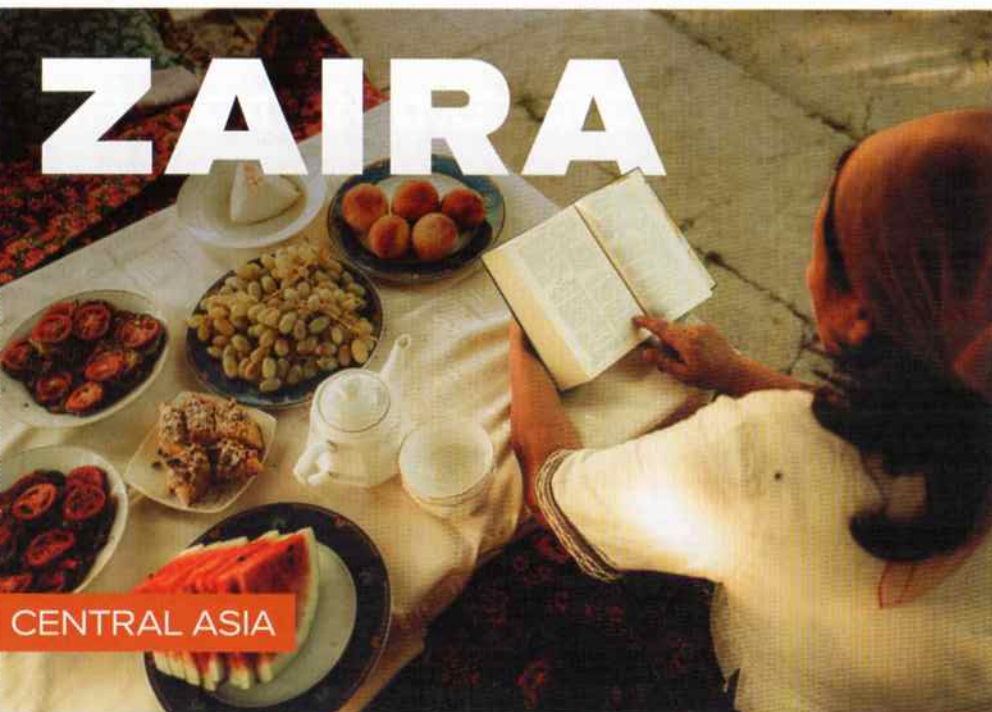
Q. HOW DO YOU THINK RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAN WILL AFFECT CHRISTIAN WOMEN?

BAHAR: Since the death of Mahsa Amini (who died in custody after being arrested by Iran's morality police), women have become even braver. The younger generation of women are using social media, YouTube, etc., to fight back over questions of human rights. And, especially in bigger cities, a large number of men have started to support the women too.

Regardless of gender, faith, ethnicity, now is the time that the people of Iran are more united than ever. They are asking for justice for all. For human rights.

We pray that the protests lead to change and for more freedom for women and for Christians. But, if that doesn't happen, then minorities and marginalised people become more vulnerable than ever. Christian women will face even worse oppression than before, perhaps. We must keep praying for change.

You can find a week of prayer for Iran in your



Zaira* closed the door of the barn and barricaded it. She couldn't let anyone else see what she was about to do, hear what she was about to say. Alone, she knelt down and prayed: "Jesus, come into my heart. I am a sinner. Forgive my sins." With that prayer, years of searching ended; with that prayer, years of persecution began.

SEARCHING AND SCARED

Growing up, Zaira lived in fear, terrified of what would happen to her after her death. She tried so hard to do all her religion required, even memorising

and reciting them day and night. "I kept repeating the Islamic prayers, but I was still searching."

Then tragedy struck: her father fell gravely ill and died. In her grief she cried out to God: "Do You exist or not?" she demanded. "Where is my father?"

God's answer came through a book. As she sorted through her father's possessions, she was surprised to find some Christian books he had once been given and which, for some reason, he had kept. One book, in particular, seemed to address the questions she had spent years struggling with

"I read about Jesus," she recalls. "It said, 'Whoever has faith in Jesus will not die but live again.' That was what I had been looking for. I found it. It all poured into me, like through a funnel."

In that moment, Zaira made her decision. She went to the barn, prayed the prayer and felt a joy she had never known.

"I felt like I flew up and came back down," she said. "My mouth couldn't stop saying 'Jesus.'"

PERSECUTION AND PAIN

From then on, life changed. Zaira met with some Christians in a neighbouring village, who were

more books to read. But when her eldest brother found out, he was furious and threw her precious books into the fire. Despite his anger, Zaira carried meeting with other Christians whenever she could. She told her younger sisters about Jesus. Some of her family and friends even became Christians.

"You have to go with two weapons: prayer and the Word."

That only made others in her family even more angry. She was beaten several times, including when she was pregnant. One of her brothers tried to force her to recite the Islamic declaration of faith. When Zaira refused, he disowned her, shouting, "I have no sister. Leave! I disown you."

"All I said was, 'Yes, God.' That's all," Zaira says. "Then I forgave my mother, my brother and everyone."

THE AMAZING MIRACLE

Zaira didn't return to her family for several years after that incident. During her absence the relatives who became Christians also suffered persecution. Some of her Christian nieces

against their will, others were badly beaten. Like Zaira, however, their faith was strong.

"While they were beating us, we pictured Jesus' suffering," one of them told Zaira. "It gave us strength."

Eventually, things changed. The example of Zaira and the other believers changed the attitudes of those around her. Then came what Zaira calls the most amazing miracle: her mother-in-law became a Christian.

"I used to think that even if the whole world believed, my mother-in-law would not. When she believed, my eyes were opened," she recalls.

Open Doors supports many women like Zaira through employment and training schemes to help them gain independence, and discipleship training to help them live out their faith. And with your help, Zaira is able to support other vulnerable women who are facing isolation and persecution, and who are facing emotional, psychological and physical abuse.

"You need to be bold, stand firm in your faith, and be courageous," she shares. "You have to go with two weapons: prayer and the Word."

✚ LISTEN

"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." (John 11:25-26)

⌚ LINGER

In her bleakest moments, Zaira realised that God heard her. Remember that God is close to you at all times.

➡ LIVE

"Moments of persecution are when God places you before people, and you must speak," says Zaira. Are there opportunities to speak that you can take?

✋ PRAY

- Zaira asks us to pray that God would give her wisdom to find ways to connect with seekers and bring them to Him
- Pray for Christian women and girls, that they would be kept safe from physical violence and forced marriages.

