

Coercion and Conversion: Unraveling the Issue of Forced Religious Conversions in Pakistan

Introduction to the situation in Pakistan.

UN experts have expressed deep concern over the increasing cases of abductions, forced marriages, and conversions of underage girls and young women belonging to religious minorities in Pakistan. They have called for immediate action to curb these practices and ensure justice for the victims. The experts have urged the Pakistani government to take prompt measures to prevent such acts, conduct thorough investigations in line with domestic laws and international human rights obligations, and hold the perpetrators accountable.

The aforementioned increase has been noted to occur to victims of 12 to 25 years old. Estimates suggest that up to 1,000 religious minority women and girls face this fate each year, but the true numbers are difficult to determine. These cases often go unpunished, with the police being reluctant to investigate properly. Instead, the parents are often given conversion and marriage

certificates, and the girl is considered to have willingly converted and married. The experts are troubled by reports of girls as young as mentioned trafficked, forced into marriages with much older men, and coerced to convert to Islam, all of which violate international human rights law. They highlight that these marriages and conversions often occur under the threat of violence to the girls, women, or their families.

Forced religious conversions are perpetrated to those of religious minorities in Pakistan. In Pakistan, Islam is the official religion. The majority, 96.5% of the population, follows Islam, with Sunni Muslims constituting the largest segment. The remaining 3.5% of the population includes individuals practicing Christianity and Hinduism. The perpetrators of these crimes come from various backgrounds and social statuses, but they are typically men who belong to the majority Muslim community. Some cases involve influential men who manipulate women and girls from religious minorities, while others involve opportunistic

abductors who target girls from impoverished minority backgrounds. Due to the likelihood of little consequences for their actions, these perpetrators take advantage of the fact that their crimes can be concealed under the guise of religion. This advantage allows them to evade punishment for their actions. Numerous cases presented to the Inquiry support these observations.

While acknowledging Pakistan's previous attempts to pass legislation to prohibit forced conversions and protect religious minorities, the experts express their disappointment at the ongoing lack of access to justice for the victims and their families. They note that religious authorities, security forces, and the justice system may be involved in facilitating these acts.

The experts further highlight that the court system, at times, allows these offenses to occur by accepting fraudulent evidence from the perpetrators regarding the victims' age, consent to marriage, and conversion. In some cases, religious interpretations have been misused by courts to justify victims remaining with their abusers.

The experts stress the importance of providing access to justice and equal protection under the law for all victims, regardless of their religious background. They call on Pakistani authorities to adopt and enforce legislation that prohibits forced

conversions, forced and child marriages, kidnapping, and trafficking, and to fulfill their international human rights commitments to combat slavery, human trafficking, and uphold the rights of women and children.

The legality of forced religious conversion.

In court, the issue is often portrayed as a religious matter, with the perpetrators' lawyers appealing to the judges' religious sentiments by claiming that the girls voluntarily converted to Islam. In most cases, the decisions favor the perpetrators, resulting in the girls losing contact with their families. This practice thrives in Sindh and Punjab due to various actors involved, including clerics who play a crucial role in the conversion and marriage process. The tolerance of such practices by government officials and politicians stems from the fear of religious tensions and conflicts.

Courts frequently prioritize the application of religious laws over existing civil laws, disregarding them entirely. An illustrative example is the case of Homa Younus, a 14-year-old Catholic girl who was abducted and forcibly converted. Despite the Child Marriage Restraint Act in Sindh province, which prohibits marriages below the age of 18 (while at the national level, the age is 16), the Sindh High Court chose to invoke religious law. The court determined that a girl can be married once she has experienced her first menstrual cycle, as per Sharia.

This case exemplifies the complex and conflicting interplay between three different legal frameworks: federal law, provincial legislation, and religious interpretations. As is often the case, minorities bear the brunt of vulnerability within the context of such clashes.

In addition to the widespread violations of minority rights, there is an alarming misuse of blasphemy laws. These laws, firmly established in the Pakistan Penal Code, provide a broad definition of blasphemy. Given the political, social, and cultural climate of the country, these laws often succumb to irrationality and hypersensitivity. Almost anything that contradicts the beliefs of the majority can be labeled as blasphemous. In Pakistan, where religion holds significant influence, accusations of blasphemy are enough to subject individuals to public humiliation and trauma, and in the most extreme cases, even result in death.

In the face of the increase in forced abductions, there have been several attempts to illegalise forced conversion in the region of Sindh, southern Pakistan. In October 2021, an anti-forced conversion bill was dismissed by a parliamentary committee. Despite protests from legislators belonging to minority communities, the Ministry of Religious Affairs opposed the proposed law. In 2016, a law was enacted in Sindh province that declared forced conversion a crime punishable by a

life sentence. However, the region's governor declined to ratify the legislation.

Given that Pakistani law fails to protect young girls, family members attempt to rely on police to exert justice. However, family members of the victims report that the police often fail to take their complaints seriously, either refusing to register the reports or dismissing the abductions as "love marriages." Abductors force victims to sign documents falsely attesting to their legal age for marriage, as well as their voluntary marriage and conversion. The police then use these documents as evidence that no crime has occurred. Forced conversions thrive unchecked on a money-making web that involves Islamic clerics who solemnize the marriages, magistrates who legalize the unions and corrupt local police who aid the culprits by refusing to investigate or sabotaging investigations, say child protection activists.

The case of the two sisters: Reena and Raveena.

In 2019, the Sindi community was struck by the disappearance of Reena and Raveena, and the Holi festival was marred by tragedy. These two Hindu sisters were kidnapped in March to be married off to two much older men, Safdar Ali and Barkat Ali, both of whom were already married with children. However, this did not deter the kidnappers from forcing the sisters into a marriage with the goal of

converting them to Islam and severing all ties to their former community and family.

The events unfolded on a Wednesday when armed men took the sisters from their home. The next day, they were converted to Islam at the Bharchundi Sharif, a Sufi shrine, and then married in the Punjab province, where the legal age for marriage is only 16. Shortly after, a viral video of the sisters surfaced, in which they claimed they were well and had willingly embraced Islam as their new religion.

At the Dargah Bharchundi Sharif seminary, young Hindu girls are rapidly converted to Islam and

married according to an established pattern. After conversion, they cut off family ties and assume legal responsibilities for them. While there are allegations of forced conversions, the Pir (religious leader) denies any coercion. There have been no known cases of girls returning to their families. Activists denounce the lack of power the vulnerable Hindu minority has in confronting the Pir and his influential political and religious followers.

The Sindi community was devastated, but their pleas seemed unheard by Pakistani authorities and



Photo: Reuters

the local justice system, which turned a deaf ear to the tragedy. The main argument presented was that it was consensual, merely a result of youthful

love. Raveena was 15, and Reena was 14, both living in Gotki, Sindh province, and their lives had been completely upended. In legal and conversion documents, their ages had been altered to 19 and 18, respectively. Entries in the seminaries were recorded by hand, without birth dates, and only their age at the time of conversion was noted. They were now called Nadia and Aasia, no longer Reena and Raveena, and quickly married off to the two men, as the religious leader stated, "so that no one can accuse us of keeping an unmarried girl with us."

Their father, Lal, along with 2,000 other Hindus, led protests that resulted in blocking the local highway.

In addition to mobilizing protests, the family filed a report alleging kidnapping with the authorities, who initially seemed to take action. In late March, the Islamabad High Court ordered both sisters to be placed in a women's shelter.

However, what seemed like a positive outcome turned tragic when, on April 11, the same court concluded that it was not a forced marriage for conversion purposes. The court's president had formed a commission with five members to investigate whether the conversion had been

forced or not. It was concluded that the sisters were not minors and that the conversion was facilitated. The result of this decision was disastrous, as the sisters continued to live with their respective husbands, with no intervention from Pakistani authorities.

Nonetheless, the father and brother of the girls persisted in their pursuit, steadfastly rejecting the notion that their daughters had willingly married and asserting that their statements in court were a result of intense coercion by their captors. The Hindu family held deep suspicions towards Mian Mithu, the Pir of the Bharchundi Sharif shrine, renowned as one of the largest centers for forced conversions in the country. In an attempt to exonerate himself, Mian Mithu emphatically proclaimed in a press conference: "In the last 200 years, no Hindu has converted to Islam by force. All these men, women, girls, and boys, whether from the Hindu community or any other, come to us to change their religion by their own decision. They are not forced to convert."

However, this assertion contradicted the stark reality documented by the HRCP (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan), and the Hindu community contends that such occurrences are even more pervasive.

Although the fate of Reena and Raveena did not culminate in the tragic outcome that befell other girls in similarly distressing cases, their ordeal emotionally and financially devastated their family. After undergoing her conversion, Raveena consented to an interview with Radio Mashaal, recounting her path towards Islam—a narrative concealing profound and imperceptible wounds. Regrettably, her words appeared constrained, stifled by the weight of coercive circumstances engulfing her. Raveena shared that her purported decision to embrace Islam stemmed from an admiration of Muslims in her village, where she claimed to have experienced tensions with her parents. She also detailed her encounter with her current husband, an exchange of phone numbers that initiated a series of events leading to an Islamic marriage. Following her conversion, Raveena resided under the same roof as her husband's first wife, asserting that they lived together like sisters. While she claimed no longer to miss her parents, her expressions bore an indelible imprint of coercion, as if her husband permeated every sentence, guiding and filtering her speech.

Beneath the veneer of apparent normality in that interview lies a story of oppression and control. Raveena was just a child who had been stripped of her identity and compelled to embrace a faith that wasn't her own.

Other cases.

In August 2020, Simran Kumari's disappearance echoed a distressing pattern observed in the same province and district where Reena and Raveena, two sisters, had vanished a year prior. Found at the Mitha seminary, Simran, aged 17 at the time, became the subject of a viral video shortly after her disappearance. In the video, she expressed her desire to embrace Islam as her new faith and marry her chosen partner, whom she envisioned a life of happiness with. Despite these assertions, her family faced a legal injunction preventing them from retrieving her, and the police staunchly refused to initiate an investigation into her case. The narrative presented was one of "protecting" a woman who had ostensibly embraced Islam of her own accord, but this portrayal diverged significantly from the actual circumstances. Simran was now married and officially recorded as a 21-year-old woman.

In October of the same year, Arzoo Raja, a thirteen-year-old girl, disappeared from her residence in downtown Karachi, located in the Sindh province. Concerned and desperate, her parents quickly reported her disappearance to the authorities, urging them to locate her. Two days later, the police informed the distraught parents that their daughter had converted to Islam and married their Muslim neighbor, a man in his forties.

Just a month apart, and also in the Sindh province, in the feudal region of Kashmore, another distressing incident took place. Thirteen-year-old Sonia Kumari was abducted, leaving her parents in anguish. The next day, the police told her parents the news that Sonia had allegedly renounced Hinduism and embraced Islam.

In a recent case from last year, Pooja Kumari, a 15-year-old residing in Sukkur, Pakistan, found herself at the center of a distressing incident. After enduring persistent harassment from a Muslim man belonging to an influential family, urging her to embrace Islam, Pooja's life took a tragic turn. Her lifeless body was discovered two weeks later, bearing multiple gunshot wounds, the consequence of her resolute resistance against forced abduction, conversion, and marriage. The perpetrators have confessed to their crime. Regrettably, information regarding the prosecution of the accused, Lashari, remains uncertain. Despite prior warnings to local law enforcement by the perpetrator's parents, no effective measures were taken, further contributing to the unfortunate fate that befell Pooja.

Conclusion.

Upon examining how forced conversion cases are handled within the legal framework of Pakistan, a notable observation emerges: the Pakistani legal system often grapples with conflicts arising from

the application of different laws. This normative dispersion leads to significant legal uncertainty for victims during the ensuing trials, if any trials take place at all. Adding to the predicament, judges frequently display religious bias, compromising their ability to apply legislation impartially. Consequently, victims find themselves at the mercy of their perpetrators, with their human rights left unprotected in practice. Moreover, in addition to the lack of legal safeguards for victims, perpetrators tend to target individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. This strategic selection places the families of victims in a position of financial vulnerability, as they lack the means to pursue legal actions and may face devastating financial consequences if they attempt to do so.

Despite these egregious human rights violations, the international response has been dishearteningly minimal. The United States' recent decision to designate Pakistan as a "country of particular concern" for religious freedom violations stands as the most significant and notable reaction from the international community. However, it is crucial that states set aside their political agendas and address the grave human rights abuses occurring within Pakistan.

The issue of forced religious conversion goes beyond mere religious freedom and encompasses a complex array of interconnected problems. It

infringes upon fundamental rights such as the right to personal development and physical and moral integrity. The victims, often young girls, are coerced into marrying men two or three times their age, completely against their will. These decisions are evidently not made freely, and the act of surrendering their childhood to embrace a new faith is a deeply troubling circumstance that no one should have to endure. Such violations of children's rights are taking place, yet both the Pakistani

authorities and the international community seem largely oblivious to the severity of the situation. Remaining passive in the face of such atrocities is tantamount to being complicit in the continuous abuse of our girls' and women's rights.

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