

Abduction, Conversion, & Child Marriage

*of Religious Minority
Girls in Pakistan*

2022 Update



***A Jubilee Campaign Submission to the UN OHCHR
on Child, Early, and Forced Marriage (CEFM)***

Introduction

Regrettably, one of the most horrific human rights trends occurring in Pakistan and unfortunately increasing over the past two years during the pandemic, is child marriage. Two separate instigators, however, are responsible for the atrocity. Not only in Pakistan, but across the world and especially in Asia and in nations where gender inequality is institutionalized, economic hardship has driven impoverished parents to sell their young daughters into marriages either to eliminate them as “financial burdens” or exploit them as a means to earn income.⁽¹⁾ Simultaneously, lack of legal protection for faith minorities emboldens radical Muslim men to kidnap, forcibly convert to Islam, and ‘marry’ young girls from minority communities, most often Christian and Hindu.

According to the National Commission of Justice and Peace (NCJP) and the Pakistan Hindu Council, each year approximately 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls in Pakistan are kidnapped, forcibly converted to Islam, and married off to their kidnappers or rapists. This report will provide an overview of several common factors involved in such cases of forced conversion and abduction. The hope is that this report may serve as a tool to conduct advocacy and effectively address the situation and worrying trends of forced conversion and abductions of girls and women in Pakistan.



Noteworthy Cases

**October
2019**

In October 2019, 14-year-old Christian girl Huma Younus was kidnapped by Muslim man Abdul Jabbar and transported to a faraway city; in the days following her disappearance, Huma's family received religious conversion papers and a marriage certificate, both of which Huma's mother Nagina insists are fake. Huma's family has received numerous threats of violence by the girl's captor and his brother, including pictures of lethal weapons, if they try to look for their daughter. Despite that the family provided a baptism certificate and other documentation of Huma's age, authorities have refused to investigate the case and it was reported in July 2020 that Huma has become pregnant due to the sexual violence inflicted by her abductor.⁽²⁾ Later, in September 2020, Justice Ms. Nusrat Sikandar of East Karachi issued a non-bailable warrant for Jabbar's arrest, though police have not moved on it.⁽³⁾

**April
2020**

In April 2020, 14-year-old Christian girl Myra Shehbaz was on her way to complete activities as a domestic worker in Faisalabad when she was abducted from the street and forced into a vehicle by a group of Muslim men led by Muhammad Naqash. Myra's mother fears her daughter may be "raped, forcefully converted to Islam, or even killed." Despite Myra's family providing documents proving Myra to be a minor, the court accepted false documentation of the perpetrator, Naqash, which alleged that Myra was of age. In August, the High Court decided that the marriage and religious conversion were both legal and that Myra must remain with Naqash and "be a good wife".⁽⁴⁾

**June
2020**

In June 2020, 12-year-old Christian girl Farah Shaheen was kidnapped by three men, forced to marry one of her captors, a 29-year-old Muslim man, before he shackled her, raped her, and subjected her to forced labor in inhumane conditions.⁽⁵⁾ After authorities rescued her in December 2020, Farah provided a likely-forced statement that she had married her captor and changed religions by choice, and police dropped the case. Fortunately, however, Farah returned to her family safely in January 2021.⁽⁶⁾



**July
2020**

In July 2020, 15-year-old Saneha Kinza Iqbal was kidnapped on her way to church by 30-year-old Muslim man Saeed Amanat. When Saneha did not return home after church prayers, her family contacted the police after hearing that a neighbor saw Saneha and Amanat in a car together. Police refused to register a case or investigate, and Saneha's brother visited Amanat's home, where Amanat's father reassured that Saneha would be returned in a few days' time. However, Saneha's family later received a phone call from Amanat that he would not return Saneha to her family.(7)

**August
2020**

In late August 2020, Hindu girl Miza Kumari was abducted, raped, forcefully converted to Islam, and married to a Muslim man in Sialkot, Punjab. Months later in January 2021, an activist tweeted a video of Miza's parents pleading for assistance in rescuing their daughter, stating that "we'll kill ourselves if our daughter is not given back. We are poor, we can't fight with culprits, no one is helping us in Pakistan. We request, who[ever is] watching this video to help us". Instead of lodging charges against the perpetrators, authorities opened a case against Miza's father in an attempt to silence his and his wife's efforts to raise awareness.(8)

**October
2020**

In October 2020, 45-year-old Muslim man Azhar Ali kidnapped the child of his neighbors, 13-year-old Christian girl Arzoo Raja. Ali then submitted fabricated records to the court which alleged that Arzoo had willingly converted to Islam and that she was 18 years old and therefore legally marriageable. Despite that Arzoo's parents provided documentation (i.e., birth certificate, school registration records) proving that Arzoo was underage, the court initially ruled that the marriage was permissible and ordered her to return to Ali's custody. Fortunately, after much international condemnation, Arzoo was rescued and transported to a government-run shelter and after a year was finally reunited with her family. Azhar Ali currently is facing multiple charges of kidnapping, child marriage, and rape; however, his January 2021 release on bail does not bode well for achieving justice.(9)

**November
2020**

In November 2020, 13-year-old Hindu Dalit girl Sonia Kumari was kidnapped by armed men and forcibly converted to Islam in Sindh province. Shortly following the incident, Sonia's mother and four siblings pleaded in a video for Prime Minister Imran Khan and the nation's Supreme Court to recover Sonia and safely return her home; however, a Hindu human rights activist recently received a letter from Sonia's family alleging that Sonia had willingly converted and married to her 36-year-old captor. The activist believes the family was coerced into making this statement and that in reality they have given up hope on Sonia's case. (10)

February 2021

In February 2021, an underaged Hindu girl, Neena Kumari failed to return home from school one day, and her family later learned that policeman Ghulam Maroof Qadri abducted Neena, forced her to convert to Islam, renamed her 'Maria', and then married her in Karachi, 400 kilometers away from her home. The marriage certificate, which was later uploaded to social media, alleges that Neena is 19 years old, but her family asserts that she is a minor.⁽¹¹⁾

Also in February 2021, Hindu girl Reena Meghwar was abducted from Keriogjar, Badar, and forcibly converted to Islam and married to her kidnapper Muhammad Qasim; though the family filed an FIR, the police did not register the case nor did they search for the girl. Two months later in April 2021, Reena was filmed on the terrace of a house crying and asking passersby's to help her escape and return home lest she commit suicide.⁽¹²⁾ In July, Reena was presented before a civil judge where she testified in favor of her perpetrator; despite indicators that she was coerced into making such a statement (i.e., that she was emotionally unstable and fainted before court), the judge ordered her to return to her 'husband'.⁽¹³⁾

March 2021

In March 2021, 13-year-old Hindu girl Kavita Oad was kidnapped and forcibly converted to Islam in Sindh Province by Islamic cleric Mian Mithoo; it is still unconfirmed if she has been married off to her kidnapper. Days after the incident, an unidentified group of radical Islamist individuals set fire to Kavita's family's home.⁽¹⁴⁾

In March 2021, Johnson and Samina Masih received news that their 13-year-old daughter Shakaina Masih, who had been missing for a month, had converted to Islam and married a Muslim man. Shakaina's family believes that she was kidnapped after leaving a family's home she was a domestic worker for and before returning to her employer's office. They provided police evidence of Shakaina's age, but authorities "showed no interest in the case".⁽¹⁵⁾

Also in March 2021, 13-year-old Hindu girl Pooja Maghwar was abducted while she was returning home from work in Sindh province's Tando Jam town. When Pooja's father, a textile mill worker, attempted to file a report with the police but was rejected. Hindu Member National Assembly revealed that Pooja had been rescued by police, at which point they learned that she was forcibly converted to Islam and married against her will.⁽¹⁶⁾

**April
2021**

Adult Cases: The Case of Aarti Bai

Regrettably, girls belonging to minority faith communities are not the only group targeted by abduction. In April 2021, 22-year-old Hindu woman Aarti Bai went did not return home after going to work at a beauty parlor in Lakarna, Sindh province. Days later, Aarti was found to be converted to Islam and married to Muslim man Muhammad Fawad; while in custody, Aarti was prohibited from meeting with her parents, and she provided statement that she had converted and married on her own free will, though this was likely coerced as she was accompanied in court by her 'husband'. Aarti's lawyer requested a medical checkup of Aarti to determine whether she had been tortured or harmed while in the custody of Muhammad; however, the judge refused and appeared to be under compulsion to rule in favor of the abductor.⁽¹⁷⁾

May 2021

In May 2021, 13-year-old Christian girl Nayab Gill was kidnapped in Punjab by a Muslim man named Saddam who is already married with four daughters, and forced to marry him against her will and convert to Islam. Nayab's mother explained that in a call with her daughter, Nayab claimed that she did not want to return and that she wishes her family would consider her dead; Nayab's mother strongly believes she was forced into making these statements out of fear of reprisal from her kidnapper. She also believes that Saddam had brainwashed Nayab into believing that Christianity was an "irrational faith" and that the only true religion is Islam. The Pakistani court refused to hear Nayab's family's pleas nor review the victim's birth certificate and ruled in favor of the perpetrator.⁽¹⁸⁾

**July
2021**

In July 2021, 9-year-old Christian girl Elisha from Hyderabad was alone at home when 45-year-old Muslim man Babar forcefully entered the home, beat, and raped Elisha.⁽¹⁹⁾

August 2021

In August 2021, an unnamed 14-year-old Christian girl went missing from her family home while preparing for an exam she was to take the following morning. The ninth-grader's parents were initially suspicious of a local resident and the son of a PTI party leader. The girl's mother Noreen was initially told by the PTI leader that her daughter would be returned soon, but she received more information later on that her daughter had married her abductor and converted to Islam. When Noreen reached out to the PTI later on, he threatened both her daughter's and her family's safety. Noreen has since reported that the local authorities refused to file a First Information Report (FIR), claimed that her daughter likely eloped and converted willingly, and ignored the case.(20)

In August 2021, two Christian sisters, 16-year-old Muqds Nadeem and 12-year-old Mehwish Nadeem were alone at home when a group of six Muslim men led by Muhammad Azeem forced themselves into the home armed with guns, beat the two girls, then kidnapped the elder and dragged her onto the street.(21)

In August 2021, radical Muslim man Muhammad Ali Nawaz entered the home of Hindu man Mangal Bheel, physically assaulted him, and abducted his 15-year-old daughter Chatro. It is assumed that Nawaz intends to forcibly convert her to Islam and marry her.(22)

In August 2021, two Christian cousins, 15-year-old Simran and Sheeza, were left home alone to care for one of the disabled family members while the rest of the family attended a funeral. When the family returned home, Simran and Sheeza were no longer at home and the disabled relative informed the family that the girls were kidnapped at gunpoint outside of the home while they were leaving to purchase some food. (23)

Also in August 2021, Christian father and rickshaw driver Gulzar Masih reported to the police that his daughter, 14-year-old Chashman Kanwal, had gone missing after he went to pick her up from school and was unable to find her. Days later, Chashman's kidnapper sent her family a video of her claiming that she had converted to Islam willingly and that she had changed her name to Aisha Bibi. The kidnappers also sent Chashman's family a letter signed by Muhammad Ijaz Qadri certifying Chashman's religious conversion; Muhammad Qadri is the district president of the Sunni Tehreek organization, which is known for supporting the death penalty for blasphemy.(24)

**September
2021**

In September 2021 in Karachi, an 8-year-old Christian girl by the name of Liza Younas was kidnapped and raped by 20-year-old Muslim neighbor Muhammad Bota; after committing the sexual assault, Bota attempted to kill Liza by hitting her with a stone and leaving her unconscious on the ground outside before fleeing. Liza's family found her on the street in poor condition and took her for an examination at Sahiwal Hospital which confirmed she was raped. Authorities have arrested Bota and he is liable to punishment of between 10 and 25 years in prison.(25)

Adult Cases: The Case of Sonika Bai

In September 2021, the sister of aforementioned Aarti Bai, 24-year-old Sonika, was on her way to Resham Gali Bazar to search for a dress for her upcoming wedding which was to take place in November, and did not return home. Her brother received a message from her WhatsApp that she would return 'soon'. Sonika's family tracked her phone's location to the home of one of her Muslim friends, and they fear she was abducted and forced to convert to Islam. Sonika spoke to her father on the phone and informed him she was being held hostage and faced threats if she tried to escape.(26)

**October
2021**

In October 2021, it was reported that 17-year-old Christian girl Misbah Imdad has gone into hiding with her family in Faisalabad after receiving threats of abduction and forced marriage from Muslim man Muhammad Saqib. Initially, upon Misbah's father's refusal to hand over his daughter for marriage against her will, Saqib falsely accused Misbah's brother Shahnawaz of stealing money and kidnapping his daughter; with neither a proper investigation nor evidence, the police arrested Shahnawaz, who currently remains in prison. Fearful of what other actions Saqib might take to carry out revenge, Misbah and her family have been living in hiding for over a month "in fields and makeshift shelters".(27)

**November
2021**

In November 2021, 12-year-old Christian girl Mareeb Abbas went missing and it was revealed later that she had been kidnapped by 22-year-old Muslim man Muhammad Daud, transported from Sahiwal to Balochistan, and forced to convert to Islam and marry Daud. The police have arrested two suspects but have yet to rescue Mareeb.(28)

**December
2021**

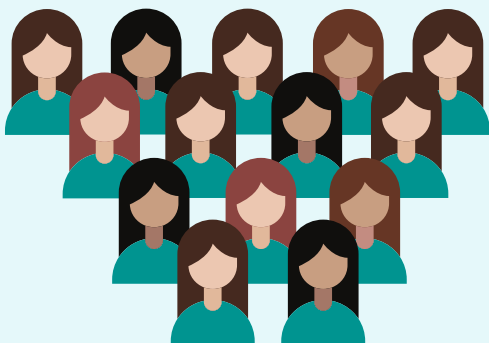
In December 2021, it was reported that 13-year-old Hindu girl Roshni Meghwar of Sindh province's Mirpur Khas district had been married to a Muslim man, Mohammad Moosa, who is more than double her age. Roshni had been originally kidnapped months earlier and converted to Islam against her will. As part of her coerced transformation, Roshni's name was legally changed to Razia and she had been kept in confinement by her abductor-turned-'husband'.⁽²⁹⁾

Adult Cases: The Case of Hariyan Meghwar

Also in December 2021, 19-year-old Hindu woman Hariyan Meghwar was kidnapped, gang raped, forcibly converted to Islam, and married to perpetrator Bhai Khan, a 31-year-old Muslim man who is already married. Former Member of Delhi Legislative Assembly, Mr. Manjinder Singh Sirsa, shared a video of the incident on his Twitter account and condemned the atrocity, stating "She is screaming for help but they aren't afraid of any police or action and they dragged her from hair & put her in car". In a follow-up Tweet, Mr. Sirsa lamented, "shameful to see Pak[istan] Media reporting it as a consent marriage".⁽³⁰⁾

**January
2022**

In January 2022, 14-year-old Pentecostal Christian girl Mahnoor Ashraf disappeared after she left home in Lahore; she had been abducted by 45-year-old Muslim neighbor Muhammad Ali Khan Ghauri. The family unsuccessfully attempted to rescue Mahnoor, and days later they received news that she had converted to Islam and that Ghauri formalized a marriage certificate claiming her to be 19 years old. Mahnoor's family filed a report with the police with documentation of her true age, though authorities have yet to take action.⁽³¹⁾



Each year approximately 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls in Pakistan are kidnapped, forcibly converted to Islam, and married off to their kidnappers or rapists.

Challenges

i. Insufficient Protection for Women & Girls

Unfortunately, the crime of child and forced marriage persists in Pakistan despite numerous legislations prohibiting the activity. The 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act criminalizes the marriage of boys under the age of 18 years and girls under the age of 16 years [age discrepancy to be discussed in following paragraphs]. Moreover, the law outlines punishments – though insufficiently stringent (i.e., a month in prison and a small fine of 1,000 rupees approximately equivalent to five US dollars) and usually disproportionate to the gravity of the crime – to offenders, including men above the age of 18 years who marry a child, as well as parents and guardians who permit such child marriages.⁽³²⁾ Section 310-A of Pakistan’s Penal Code states that “whoever gives a female in marriage or otherwise compels her to enter into marriage, as badla-e-sulh, wanni, or swara or any other custom or practice under any name [...] shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to seven years but shall not be less than three years and shall also be liable to a fine of five hundred thousand rupees”. Section 498-B goes on to extend the same punishment to “whomever coerces or in any manner whatsoever compels a woman to enter into marriage”.⁽³³⁾

Even some inadequacies exist within the above legal protections which render them deficient in fully eradicating forced marriage of children. Despite the national 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act prohibiting marriage of a girl under the age of 16 years, courts have been known to apply Sharia law to rule that marriage of an underage girl is permissible in the case that she has had her first menstrual cycle. Such an unconscionable ruling was handed down in February 2020 by Sindh High Court when the parents of Huma Younus tried to nullify the marriage on the bases (1) that Huma was kidnapped by the man who would then ‘marry’ her, (2) that the perpetrator forcefully converted Huma to Islam so that the Sharia legislation would permit her underage marriage, and (3) that Huma was just 14 years old and therefore a child.⁽³⁴⁾

Moreover, attempts at expanding legislations to protect the Pakistani girl child from marriages have been met with rejection by Islamists. A 2019 bill introduced by Pakistani senator Sherry Rehman to raise the legal minimum age for marriage to 18 years – while it was favored by the majority and while it did pass – was opposed by some for being anti-Islam, “against the Sharia”, and too Western. Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam (JUI-F) Senator Ghafoor Haideri argued that “Islam allows marriage before puberty” and requested the proposed bill be reviewed by the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII).⁽³⁵⁾ Fortunately the legislation was passed, though it was not without numerous previous attempts; in October 2017, the Senate Standing Committee on Interior rejected The Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Bill was outright rejected for being “un-Islamic”.⁽³⁶⁾

ii. Legal & Institutionalized Discrimination against Faith Minorities

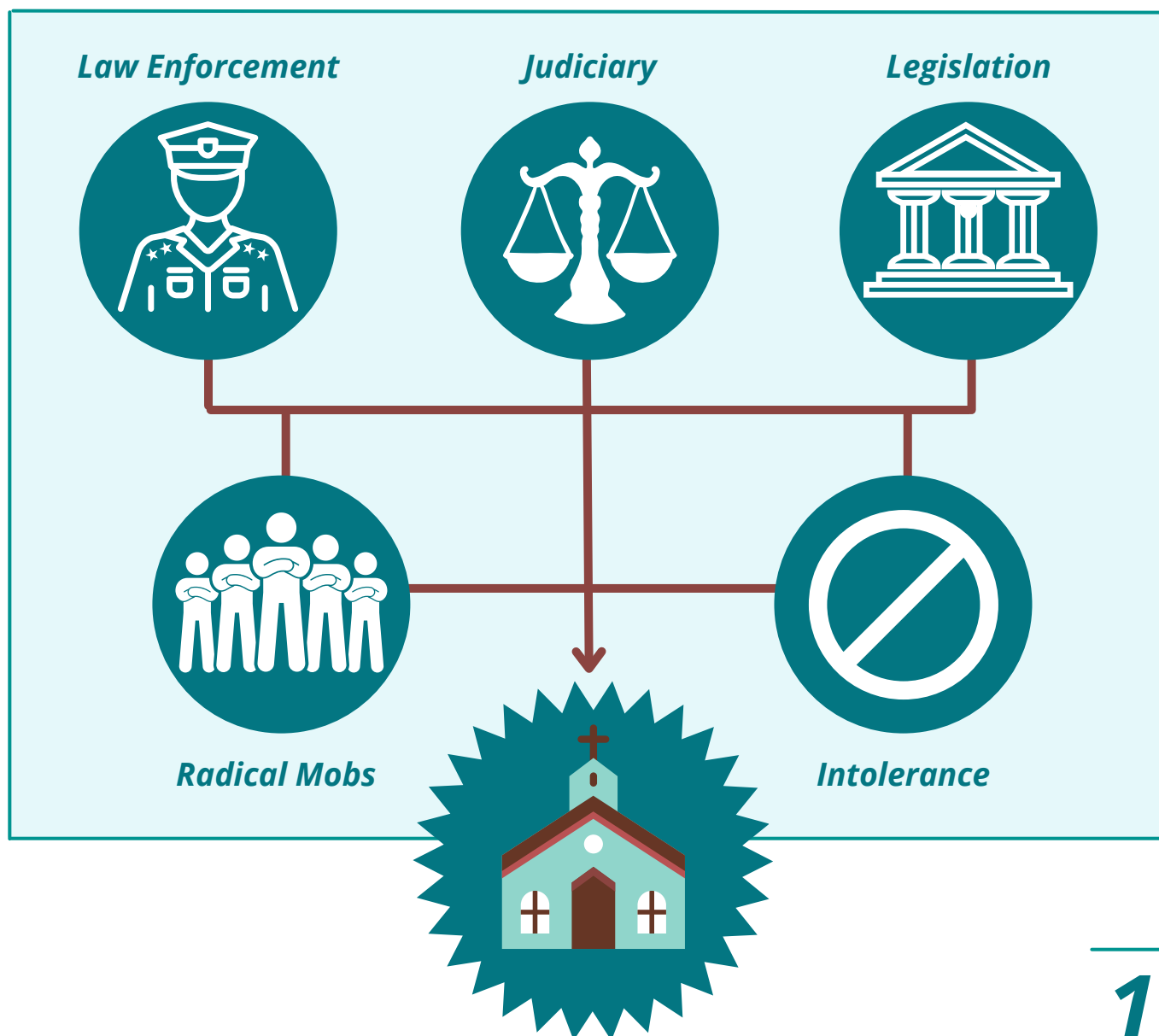
Another factor that tremendously exacerbates the trend of child marriages, especially with regards to the frequent abductions and forced marriage of faith minority girls, is the general climate of religious persecution against non-Muslim faiths. While it is both easy and quick for a Pakistani Hindu or Christian to convert to Islam, Muslims that wish to convert to other religions face condemnation and rejection by their social circles; if an individual is accused of either converting to Christianity/Hinduism themselves or evangelizing to a Muslim, they often receive threats of violence from radical Muslims. On the contrary, individuals who are responsible for assisting or forcing a minority's conversion to Islam receive praise as they are seen as furthering the dominance of Islam and even jihad. This subordination of non-Muslim faiths transcends across Pakistan's society, culture, and institutions, and therefore fosters an environment of impunity for men who kidnap, forcibly convert, and marry young minority girls.

The absence of religious freedom in Pakistan and rejection of non-Muslim faiths is even codified in national legislation. The Constitution of Pakistan in Article 2 establishes Islam as the state religion and in Article 19 restricts freedom of speech "in the interest of the glory of Islam". **(37)** Chapter XV of Pakistan's Penal Code, meanwhile, outlines religious offences, including "defiling, etc., of copy of Holy Quran", "use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet", and "uttering words, etc., with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings".**(38)** These blasphemy laws have routinely been used to arbitrarily detain and imprison faith minorities either on false accusations or for supposedly 'blasphemous' acts such as drinking out of the same water fountain as a Muslim.**(39)**

Pakistan's Constitution allows courts across the nation to make judgements in line with Shariah law in cases in which the individuals involved in the case are Muslim. As such, judges can dole out severe punishments such as stoning, flogging, and amputation for crimes listed under the Hudood Ordinance, which includes sex crimes and crimes against Islamic morality such as blasphemy.**(40)** As is routine in the cases of abduction, conversion, and child marriage of girls in Pakistan, the victims are often forcibly converted to Islam and are therefore subject to Islamic laws. Perpetrators convert their victims because they are well aware that Islamic law permits the marriage of underaged girls so long as they have had their first menstrual cycle; such was the case of Huma Younus. It is therefore incumbent upon courts, before issuing judgements in line with Islamic jurisprudence, to do their due diligence and investigate whether the victim in question is willfully and truthfully Muslim or whether she was forced to convert by perpetrators searching for a legal loophole to legislations prohibiting child marriage. Swiftly accepting falsified religious conversion documentation provided by the perpetrator violates the court's responsibility of exercising necessary scrutiny, especially when the nation is infamous for cases of fraudulent conversion and child marriage.

It is important to note that in the majority of these cases, the authorities involved – lawyers, judges and justices, police, etc. - are Muslim themselves and, as such, are less likely to campaign for and secure the release of these girls and pursue justice against radical Muslim perpetrators. On local and regional levels, police and lower judiciaries are known to “avoid adding sections related to seduction of a child, abduction and rape in First Information Reports”.⁽⁴¹⁾ In instances in which these individuals do attempt to achieve accountability for faith minorities, they are often met with condemnation by the broader Muslim society, a loss in status, and in the most extreme cases, death threats. Saif-ul Malook, defense attorney who secured the acquittal of Pakistani Christian woman Asia Bibi and couple Shagufta Kausar and Shafqat Emmanuel who were all falsely accused of blasphemy, has received threats of execution from radical Muslims and has expressed that he “can’t survive anymore in my country”.⁽⁴²⁾

Types of Persecution



Recommendations & Best Practices

Jubilee Campaign makes the following recommendations to combat and eradicate child, early and forced marriage (CEFM) in Pakistan:

Prevention

- Create an appeal or reporting mechanism to flag judges, police officers, religious institutes, Muslim clerics, and official actors who discriminate against, violate the rights of, or fail to protect religious minorities in cases of abduction, forced conversion, and child marriage. In addition to offering victims of both criminal activity (abduction, forced conversion, forced marriage) a path to addressing miscarriages of justice, it also provides a disincentive to state actors who may otherwise refuse to register cases and investigate relevant crimes, ignore documentation proving minor status, or make judicial decisions in favor of the perpetrators despite evidence pointing to elements of coercion in the kidnapping, religious conversion, and marriage of the victim.
- It should be ensured that secular laws which set the minimum legal age for marriage to 16 or 18 years preside over Islamic laws that allow for marriage as soon as puberty or menarche is reached.
- Education must emphasize that “there is no justification for violence and abuse against women and girls, whenever and wherever it occurs”(43); moreover, it should educate women and girls on the various paths to achieve prosecutorial justice as well as rehabilitation and therapy if they are or become victims of sexual violence.
- There must be a broader societal shift towards promoting interfaith harmony and tolerance as well as promoting bodily integrity of all, including women and the girl child. Pakistan’s society is largely patriarchal and tends to minimize women’s rights; the promotion of women’s rights and dignity is essential to eradicating all forms of violence against women and girls.

- Courts must rescind decisions conforming with Islamic jurisprudence stating that a girl who has had her menarche is legally marriageable, as it emboldens radical Muslim men to routinely conduct abductions and child marriages with impunity.

Protection

- Following the recovery of a girl from an abduction, forced conversion to Islam, and/or child marriage, the girl should be taken to a safe house to ensure that she is able to provide a true, uncoerced testimony of events without fear of retaliation from her abductor.

Investigation

- A specially trained and appointed taskforce should conduct proper and objective investigations regarding the circumstances surrounding the girl's conversion and marriage. In particular, authorities must consider documentation provided by victims' families which more often than not prove the minor status of kidnapped girls; at the same time, authorities must examine the fraudulent documentation provided by perpetrators that falsely claim that the victim is of marriageable age. Authorities must investigate specifically any and all conditions of coercion or threat under which marriages and religious conversions are made.
- Allow for the presence of a minority representative or ombudsman to review the case.
- Train judges to interpret laws in accordance with international human rights norms and legislation.

Rehabilitation

- Psychological and psychiatric support, including post-trauma therapy and counseling as well as medication when necessary, must be readily and financially accessible to survivors of kidnapping and sexual exploitation.
- Survivors of kidnapping and sexual exploitation who have endured physical injuries should be provided with free or financially accessible intervention, including: emergency contraceptives; pregnancy testing; testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections; routine follow-up medical reviews; and physical therapy.

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Jubilee Campaign is a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 2003. Our work focuses on promoting the rights of religious and ethnic minorities and raising the status of vulnerable women and children - to protect them from bodily harm and sexual exploitation.