

Unveiling the Plight of Minority Girls: Confronting Forced Conversions and Safeguarding Rights

~ Ms. Shabnaz Wali

Delivery Associate, Legal Aid Society

Historically recognized for its pluralism and diversity, Sindh Dharti has long prided itself on fostering hospitality and peaceful coexistence among its inhabitants. With the highest percentage of religious minority communities residing in this province, Sindh's heritage has been characterized by inclusivity, manifested through centuries-old temples, churches, and other places of worship in diverse neighborhoods. However, the recent rise of religious nationalism in Pakistan has endangered this rich heritage, particularly for religious minorities. The escalating issues of forced conversion, abduction, exploitation, and discrimination have posed severe threats to the lives and rights of religious minorities. Among the vulnerable, women from religious minority communities are disproportionately affected due to the intersectionality of their religious and gender identities. This article seeks to shed light on the causes and repercussions of forced conversions of minority women and propose potential solutions.

First and foremost, it is crucial to acknowledge that Islam explicitly prohibits the forced conversion of individuals to another religion against their will. Islamic teachings historically include precedents demonstrating the protection of religious minorities during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and subsequent Muslim rulers, indicating a deep commitment to religious freedom. The Constitution of Pakistan similarly guarantees freedom of religion and belief, with the

country endorsing international legislative instruments to uphold this commitment. Notably, the founder of Pakistan affirmed this principle in his inaugural speech to the Constituent Assembly, proclaiming that

"You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed - that has nothing to do with the business of the State."

However, despite these principles and obligations, present-day Pakistan seems to be deviating from Islamic teachings and national and international commitments.



The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Pakistani Minorities conducted an inquiry into abduction, forced conversions, and marriages in Pakistan and published a report in November 2021. Shockingly, the report revealed that approximately 1,000 girls between the ages of 12-25 from religious minorities are forcibly converted to Islam and married to their abductors each year. This alarming trend has been substantiated by reports from UN agencies, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other domestic and international human rights organizations, which have referred to it as a "pandemic of forced conversion." The vulnerability of minor Hindu girls is of concern, who are often lured, threatened, or abducted from their homes and married off to men much older than themselves.

Several factors contribute to the rise of forced conversions. Firstly, there is the issue of political patronage of these groups. For example, in Sindh, Mian Mithu is regarded as one of the prominent perpetrators of forced conversions, and he enjoys immunity within different political circles. The irony is evident when one considers that the Islamabad Bar Association even invited Mian Mithu as a guest for consultation on preventing forced conversion! The blanket immunity provided

by political and law enforcement agencies allows the perpetrators of forced conversion to operate with impunity.

Secondly, the problem is exacerbated by a misinterpretation of Islamic teachings related to conversion. Although Islamic teachings explicitly forbid conversion against one's will, some religious groups incorrectly view forced conversion as a pious act that brings rewards, regardless of the means employed. This misconception perpetuates such practices. Thirdly, the lack of legislative measures to prohibit forced conversion contributes to the reluctance of the police to file First Information Reports (FIRs), hindering the pursuit of justice by the families of the victims. Other contributing factors include socio-economic inequalities that make minority women easy targets for influential perpetrators.

Forced conversions inflict emotional, economic, and social trauma upon the victim girls and their families. Research reports indicate that victims are often subjected to human trafficking, while minor girls forced into marriages with older men suffer from early pregnancies and experience mental and physical health complications. Forced conversions also contribute to the prevalence of child marriages among minority groups, who resort to intra-community marriages to protect their girls from forced conversion.



Consequently, a growing sense of insecurity and fear grips these minority communities, leading some to consider migration as a viable option.

In light of the escalating threat faced by religious minority communities in Sindh, Pakistan, it is imperative that the state takes decisive action to protect their rights. A crucial first step would be the passage of the Anti-Forced Conversion Bill, which, despite being tabled in parliament, has faced rejection due to pressure from religious-political parties. It is essential for political parties, particularly those upholding democratic values and human rights, to cease their patronage of groups responsible for forced conversions and actively work towards safeguarding minority communities. Similarly, to effectively address and prevent forced conversions, it is vital to train and sensitize law enforcement officials about the significance of religious freedom and human rights. Their understanding and commitment to upholding these principles are critical in tackling this issue.

Additionally, community outreach programs, public campaigns, and educational initiatives should be implemented to challenge societal prejudices and foster religious tolerance and respect for diversity. In this regard, organizations like the Legal Aid Society are playing an instrumental role by providing free legal aid to members of religious minorities and creating awareness about their fundamental rights. Furthermore, comprehensive support systems need to be established, including counseling services and safe houses, to assist and rehabilitate victims of forced conversions and child marriages. These systems can offer much-needed emotional and psychological support and a safe haven for those affected. Failure to act decisively risks eroding the essence of Sindh's heritage - the harmony and coexistence that are integral to the identity of Pakistan.



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