

Asif Aqeel

Testimony for USCIRF

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to shed light on what our minority communities have endured over the past several decades.

Before the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, the regions that now make up this country had a non-Muslim population of around 40%. However, due to religious violence, mass killings, and large-scale migrations, non-Muslims today make up only 4% of Pakistan's 240 million people, with Hindus and Christians forming the majority of this minority.

At the time of partition in 1947, millions of Hindus and Sikhs migrated to India, while Muslims moved to the newly formed Pakistan. Tragically, hundreds of thousands were massacred in the process. But this didn't end the politics of religion; instead, it laid the foundation for Pakistan to develop as an Islamic state. The secession of East Pakistan in 1971, which led to the creation of Bangladesh, was also marked by religious tensions, with many viewing the Bengali population as not being "fully Muslim" and closer to Hindus. This division resulted in further violence, migration, and the massacre of hundreds of thousands more.

There's an interesting contrast when it comes to religion. Pakistan is consistently ranked among the most corrupt countries in the world, which suggests that values like honesty, social justice, and human dignity—core Islamic principles—are often neglected in daily life. However, religion becomes paramount when Muslims from different sects interact. They frequently accuse each other of being lesser Muslims or even *kafir* (infidels).

In another situation, Muslims from all sects are united in their approach to offer *Daawah*—an invitation to Islam—whenever they encounter a non-Muslim. This isn't just anecdotal; it's supported by evidence from studies conducted by the Center for Law and Justice (CLJ). Our recent study for the UNDP in Christian neighborhoods in Lahore, and an earlier study in 2020 for the FCDO involving seven constitutionally recognized non-Muslim minorities, consistently show that when Muslims encounter non-Muslims, they often start with an invitation to convert and then escalate to pressure, insults, and demeaning for following what they perceive as false religions. Non-Muslims are forced to endure these conversations in silence, as any attempt to respond can lead to accusations under Pakistan's strict blasphemy laws.

In 2022, we conducted a study titled "Stories of Resilience and Resolve: An Intersectional Study on the Plight of Non-Muslim Women and Girls in Pakistan," funded by the UK-based Minority Rights Group International (MRG). The study involved girls aged 16 to women aged 60 from all four provinces of Pakistan. The study found that invitations to non-Muslim women and girls to convert to Islam are widespread, coming from teachers, fellow students, friends, neighbors, and colleagues at workplace. Along with these invitations, there are also many instances where girls from these communities are coerced into conversion and marriage. However, communities like the Ahmadis, Baha'is, and Zoroastrians reported that such conversions and marriages are not typically problems for their girls.

Our focus, therefore, narrowed to Hindu, Christian, and Sikh women. For example, in 2018, I reported on the case of Asma, a 24-year-old Christian woman from Sialkot, for news wire World Watch Monitor, supported by Open Doors. Asma had fallen in love with a Muslim man, Muhammad Rizwan Gujar. When it came time to marry, he insisted she convert to Islam. When she resisted and eventually broke off the relationship, he requested her to meet one last time. When he showed up at her home, he poured petrol on her clothes, and threatened to burn her if she didn't convert. When she still refused, he set her on fire. She suffered burns on 80% of her body and later died from her injuries. Gujar later told the police that he only meant to scare her, but the petrol accidentally ignited. Another tragic incident occurred in interior Sindh in 2022. Eighteen-year-old Pooja Oadh was shot dead for refusing to convert and marry Wahid Bux Lashari, her attacker.

Despite such instances, where Pooja and Asma suffered pressures for conversion, we have found that minor girls – between the ages of 12 to 16 – particularly from Hindu and Christian communities are the most vulnerable and susceptible to such conversions. Due to sheer poverty, illiteracy, family neglect, working as domestic worker, and little to no exposure, they are particularly vulnerable to a lesser-reported phenomenon: **religiously motivated sexual grooming**—a term coined by Professor Mariz Tadros of the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University. Our upcoming study, conducted with this framework on such marriages, reveals that these unions often don't last long. There are clear predatory patterns: the girls are initially lured into relationships with promises of marriage. Once they agree to elope, they are told that marriage is impossible without conversion, even if it's only nominal. After the marriage, they are forced to strictly observe their new religion. In most cases, the initial promises quickly fade, leaving the girl isolated, having lost her family and reputation.

NGOs often apply a one-size-fits-all approach, labeling all such cases as “forced” marriages. When these cases go to court, they are often dismissed after the girl's statement, with the police providing evidence that the girl and boy were in a relationship, meeting, and talking over the phone. Therefore, the Center for Law and Justice (CLJ) proposes not only a new approach to such marriages but also new legal strategies. This is crucial, as the government is increasingly portraying these marriages as “love marriages” rather than “forced marriages”.

To get better understanding of this area, please read my article published in The Friday Times: <https://thefridaytimes.com/11-Feb-2023/rebranding-forced-conversions-as-love-marriages>