

## **Pakistan's religious minority women facing double discrimination**

*Bushra Khaliq*

Being a woman in Pakistan is not a privilege. In fact, her situation is bad if poor, and worse if she belongs to a religious minority group. The larger picture of social, political and economic conditions of Pakistan's religious minorities today tell us that the women belonging to these groups face double discrimination and marginalization. They are abused, harassed and discriminated against, ranging from access to far lower education levels, to forced conversions, abduction, forced marriages and torture in custody.

With reference to the universal human rights standards, Pakistan's existing policy framework and personal laws available to minority women only offer stark realities of religion-based discrimination at the workplace, educational institutions and even neighborhoods.

A recently published study by the National Commission of Justice and Peace report, titled 'Life on the Margins,' speaks volumes about the prevailing conditions of minority women. The report is based on interviews with more than 1,000 Hindu and Christian women. According to the report,

43% of women belonging to minorities have suffered religious discrimination at workplace, in educational and social institutions. 76% of them also suffered sexual harassment at work, which is often a menial job and low income, such as domestic work in houses of rich people. The literacy rate is 47%, well below the national average of 57% while infant mortality rate is 10.3 % compared to the national mortality rate that is 8.7% [<http://www.ncjppk.org/life.pdf>].

These are embarrassing figures for all of us who claim to be proud Muslim Pakistanis.

The most worrying phenomenon is the forced conversion of Hindu women to Islam in Sindh province, which has become alarmingly common. The recent cases of Rinkal Kumari and Dr. Hifza got media attention because of their high profile nature. Most other cases however, are generally hushed up. According to some human rights experts, there are about 1,000 such cases officially reported every year. During the last four months, 47 Hindu girls have been abducted, forcibly converted to Islam and remarried to Muslim men. Religious bigots shamelessly exploit the social marginalization of minorities, in particular, the absence of a legal mechanism to register Hindu marriages.

The courts meanwhile, are not considering women's rights in the light of universal human rights standards, and are complicit in promoting this forced conversion by their judgments. Moreover, such judgments encourage the religious zealots to continue this forced conversion of young Hindu women by abduction and rape, using the court's rulings in their favor. Did the courts ever look into why only young minority women and girls convert to Islam, and why not older women or men?

Besides being a clear violation of human rights, this is also a clear reflection of cultural bias, whereby women's autonomy is limited or denied, significantly affecting their independence, self-esteem and freedom of choice.

Families tend to control girls' autonomy; it is therefore the men who take important decisions about their lives and well being, making it a case of several jeopardies.

The overall condition of subordination, poverty and marginalization of minority women is reflected within the private and public domains. Their living and economic conditions also places them on the margins of social and economic development.

There is an urgent need for policy responses and effective legislative measures to check the multiple discrimination against minority women. Issues such as legal disparities of personal laws concerning minorities, religious and gender biases, and forced conversions are not only questions of already vulnerable communities, but of vital national importance.

The vulnerability of these women increases when they fight alone. Not only must the government intervene with legislative measures to establish gender equality, equal opportunities and rights for minorities, but civil society must also support them in their plight. Only the end of religion based discrimination at the state and society level can bridge the gap of their social, economic and cultural division. This is not merely an issue of the minority communities, but a national issue.

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