

Stories of Resilience and Resolve: An Intersectional Study on the Plight of Non-Muslim Women and Girls in Pakistan

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Table of Contents

Abbreviations	4
Executive Summary	5
Introduction	8
Methodology and Scope	9
The Scope	9
Desk Review	10
Data Collection	10
The Participant Selection Criteria	11
Outline of FGDs and the in-depth interviews	11
The Pakistani Context	13
A Brief Overview of Religious Minority Communities in Pakistan	13
Christians	14
Hindus (Jati)	14
Scheduled Caste Hindus,	14
Sikhs	14
Ahmadis	15
The Parsees (Zoroastrians)	15
Baha'is	15
Theoretical Perspectives on Intersectionality	16
Review of Literature on Intersectionality in Pakistan	18
Findings from the Desk Review and Analysis of Qualitative Data on Intersectionality & Experiences of Minority Women	19
Theme 1: Experiences of harassment, discrimination, and violence	21
	2

Theme 2: Negative experiences around customary practices, cultural beliefs, values, social norms, laws, legal system, LEAs, and policies	25
Theme 3: Experiences around conversion or forced conversion of religion	29
Theme 4: Social expectations and perceptions about minority women	32
Theme 5: Experiences around depression, anxiety, and access to healthcare	34
Theme 6: Freedom of mobility and independence	35
Theme 7: How minority women engage in the public sphere	37
Theme 8: Impact of COVID-19 on minority women	38
Theme 9: Their roles and status around their families and community	39
Minority Women and Pakistan's Progress on SDG No. 5	41
Minority Women and Implementation of CEDAW in Pakistan	45
Policy Recommendation	46
Bibliography	47

Abbreviations

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CLJ	Center for Law and Justice
CREID	Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development
EU	European Union
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FoRB	Freedom of Religion or Belief
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
MRG	Minority Rights Group
MWF	Minority Women Forum
NIC	National Identity Cards
SAC	South Asia Collective
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations

Executive Summary

Pakistan is a multiethnic, multicultural and multi-religious country with an overwhelmingly Muslim population. However, the Constitution of Pakistan segregates the population between Muslims and non-Muslims. In most instances, religious minorities are not just religiously but culturally different with a distinct ethnicity. Literature review shows that minority communities greatly vary in their socioeconomic status. For example, most Zoroastrians run large businesses, while most Christians do menial jobs.

The women from the majority faith experience various forms of violence, discrimination or harassment. In a hyper-religious society with a history of fundamentalism, minority women suffer gender-based discrimination like Muslim women and further suffer for being a religious minority and other associated negative identity markers. Poverty additionally plays a role in discriminatory treatment.

This study aims to understand the day-to-day experiences of minority women in Pakistan, particularly from the perspective of intersectionalities emerging out of them being a minority and a woman at the same time. The study is conducted by the Center for Law and Justice (CLJ) with the assistance of the Minority Women Forum (MWF). The paper sketches a national context of women and girls from religious minorities using primary and secondary data and qualitative and quantitative input. The research team conducted five FGDs and 15 in-depth interviews to support the analysis further.

Women and girls belonging to religious minority communities are faced with intersectional discrimination on multiple accounts. For example, they were discriminated against for being women in a patriarchal society and coming from a religious minority community. The subject of the study is the following religious minorities: Jati Hindus, Christians, Scheduled Caste Hindus, Sikhs and Ahmadis. The constitution of Pakistan divides people between Muslims and non-Muslims. To analyse this intersectional study, we categorise non-Muslims into several categories:

- Religious minorities considered untouchable because of their caste origins (Christians and Scheduled Caste Hindus)
- Minorities who suffer because of associated with countries Pakistan has strained relations (Christians, Ahmadis and Hindus associated with the West, the UK and India, respectively)
- Religious minorities who claim to be Muslim (Ahmadis)
- Religious minorities considered dark in colour (Christians and Scheduled Caste Hindus)

Women across communities are considered lower than men, and minority women suffer this at the hands of Muslim and non-Muslim men. It was noted that most of the negative experiences of minority women usually took place in workplaces and educational institutes, which are naturally the places where they are most likely to interact with the majority Muslim community. Another notable trend was concentrating these experiences in Pakistan's remote towns and villages. Participants from the major cities of Pakistan, such as Lahore, Islamabad or Karachi, reported limited experiences of discrimination and other forms of oppression. Most minority women reported that whenever they told such incidents to their parents, they were often told not to retaliate out of fear that they might end up being victims of the blasphemy laws.

Minority women are considered inherently immoral. Christian women comparatively enjoy the liberty of movement and dress. Since she does not observe purdah, her character and honour are under question. However, Christian participants agreed that Muslims often implied they were lewd and more accessible when wearing jeans. Non-Muslim single mothers also suffered scorn and abuse for staying single.

Most the Christians and Scheduled Caste Hindus reported being discriminated against for their darker skin colour. Those comparatively fair in colour were told to convert to Islam as they did not look like non-Muslims.

Non-Muslim women are consistently invited and requested to convert to Islam by Muslim men and women. Teachers and students are particularly aggressive in ridiculing their faith and inviting them to Islam at the school level. Communities – Hindus, Christians and Sikhs – who report forced conversion to believe that the state fails to protect them if their minors or women were abducted and converted. Law enforcement organisations move only if complainants are rich enough to bribe them.

Hindu women wear their traditional dress like a sari. Christian women observe less purdah and sometimes wear western dressing. Ahmadi women wear a *burka* which differs from the traditional one. These differences in religion, dressing code and other identity markers invoke harassment, bullying and verbal violence in public and workplace. The minority status plays a role in befriending Muslim classmates and teachers' attitudes towards them.

Minorities from Scheduled Caste backgrounds, i.e., Christians and Scheduled Caste Hindus, find restricted to fewer occupations. The state requires only non-Muslims to apply for sanitation work, but it mainly means the minorities from so-called 'untouchable' backgrounds. Christian women are expected to work as domestic workers.

Scheduled Caste Hindu women from Sindh reported discriminatory treatment in the hospital because of their distinctive dress.

Persecution of Ahmadi women is more rigorous than of other women of other communities. Ahmadi women suffer discrimination in educational institutions and when using public transport. Participants from the Ahmadi community reported numerous experiences of outright violence against their community. Most Ahmadis reported that they usually hide their identity out of the fear that they may be denied jobs or bullied in educational institutions.

Minority women suffered discrimination from their male community members. Caste-based stratification is prevalent among Hindus. An Upper Caste Hindu woman may be banished from her community if she marries a Scheduled Caste Hindu. Access to education is also curtailed for Sikh girls, who are often given in marriage early. Respondents belonging to the Hindu and Sikh communities informed that girls have no independence regarding their education and career. Like Muslim women, minority women face several social and cultural constraints that limit their mobility and independence. Clergy, relatives and family members curtail movement and impose dress code, though it varies from one community. For example, comparatively less strict restrictions for Christians are reported, but among Hindus, Sikhs, and Ahmadis, such limits are severe. For instance, Christian clergy and men did not allow for amending their family laws that required the accusation of adultery to dissolve a marriage. Personal laws for Hindus were also not functional. This has caused many Christian women to convert to Islam to dissolve their marriage. Most Christian and Hindu participants agreed that it was common not to give women a share in

inheritance in their communities. Early marriage among Scheduled Caste Hindus was also common.

Working women reported that they suffered stress that any action could be construed as blasphemy, and because of this, they remain extra cautious at the workplace.

Political participation of minority women is negligible. Most of them do not vote or participate in political activities.

During the COVID-19 epidemic, minority women reported domestic violence.

Belonging to economically marginalised sections of society adds another layer of jeopardy. The disadvantaged situation of women in several minorities is because of the long-standing social, economic, political, and cultural marginalisation. And unfortunately, violations of their human rights are usually met with a lack of accountability. The Ministry of Planning, Development and Special Initiatives is allocated to implement and further progress on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The study looks at Pakistan's progress on Sustainable Development Goal No. 5, which aims to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" and implement CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) in Pakistan. It was found that Pakistan has made minimal progress in attaining these international commitments. Most of the policy actions taken by the Pakistani state were mere window dressing, and there was minimal data available to track Pakistan's progress on these conventions, especially when it comes to minority women.

Based on the report's findings, several recommendations have been made. Pakistan needs to take extraordinary measures for minority women. Like bringing poor minority women into the safety net program. They need to be included in the country's economic life rather and pushing them into a few menial occupations needs to change. School textbooks should stop the vilification of religions other than Islam, and minority women should be highlighted, so they are considered part of the Pakistani society. Government departments need to launch a nationwide campaign against the harassment of minority women. Family laws related to minority women also need to be improved, and incidents of forced conversion of religious minorities need to be curbed. They need to be included in SDG plans and the implementation of CEDAW.

Introduction

In 2021, the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security ranked Pakistan 167th in its Women Peace and Security Index,¹ making Pakistan the 4th worst country for women in the world, slightly better than Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria, but worse than the rest of the world. The report notes that the situation of women has worsened since 2017. Another important observation in the report is that provincial index scores closely mirror income and poverty, highlighting the critical roles of socioeconomic factors when it comes to the situation of women.

With an overall worsening situation of women in Pakistan, this study looked at the status of religious minority women specifically across a range of scenarios and contexts. This qualitative study hopes to evaluate the state of minority women in Pakistan through an intersectional lens to draw a comprehensive set of insights and policy recommendations for the government and civil society.

The Center for Law and Justice (CLJ) has conducted this study by collaborating with Minority Women Forum (MWF). This study aims to understand the day-to-day experiences of minority women in Pakistan, particularly from the perspective of intersectionalities emerging out of them being a minority and a woman at the same time. Women and girls belonging to religious minority communities are faced with intersectional discrimination on multiple accounts, being a woman in a patriarchal society and coming from a religious minority community. Lastly, belonging to economically marginalised society adds another layer of jeopardy. Social, economic, political, and cultural marginalisation is the long-standing reason for the current disadvantageous situation of religious minority women in Pakistan. Unfortunately, violations of their human rights are usually met with a lack of accountability.

The paper sketches a national context of women and girls from religious minorities using primary and secondary data and qualitative and quantitative input. It reviews issues and experiences of religious discrimination in social life and daily life interactions, in instances of forced conversions and marriages, gender-based violence, including the narrative of freedom of religion and belief. The study is intended to draw attention to religious minority women as a constantly neglected section of society and use its findings to raise awareness and strengthen advocacy for addressing their concerns and upholding their rights.

This study is part of a broader program by South Asia Collective (SAC) and its members, including London-based Minority Rights Group Europe, New Delhi-based Misaal, and Kathmandu-based Social Science Baha. The program, funded by the European Union (EU), aims to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in South Asia by improved, more collaborative monitoring, reporting, and advocacy on FoRB violations. As part of this program, the study aims to gather insights and do a detailed mapping of issues faced by women from minority communities

¹ Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and Peace Research Institute Oslo, "Women, Peace, and Security Index 2021/22 Summary: Tracking Sustainable Peace through Inclusion, Justice, and Security for Women" (Washington, DC: GIWPS and PRIO, 2021), <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/WPS-Index-2021-Summary.pdf>.

in Pakistan. The study also uses CEDAW and SDG No. 5 as a benchmark. It evaluates the condition of women from various minority groups against this standard. CEDAW, of which Pakistan is a signatory, is a consistent human rights framework for protecting all women and girls, including women and girls belonging to minorities, against discrimination in all fields of life. On the other hand, SDG No. 5 is part of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the UN General Assembly, which deals with women.

Methodology and Scope

The study primarily used qualitative methods to understand the issues of minority women. It mainly relied on a desk review, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews to prepare its findings. The details of the scope and methodology are as follows:

The Scope

Under Pakistani laws and as per the overall sociocultural understanding, religious minorities in Pakistan are defined as non-Muslim Pakistani nationals. Article 260(3)(b) of the 1973 Constitution of Pakistan describes a non-Muslim as:

a person who is not a Muslim and includes a person belonging to the Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist or Parsi community, a person of the Qadiani group or the Lahori group who call themselves 'Ahmadis' or by any other name or a Bahai, and a person belonging to any of the Scheduled Castes

While the experiences and challenges of women from ethnic minority backgrounds deserve due consideration, this study will only focus on women from religious minority backgrounds. So the word minority will strictly refer to religious minorities in Pakistan. The study focused on women from the following minority groups:

1. Christian
2. Caste/Jati Hindu
3. Scheduled Caste Hindu
4. Sikh
5. Ahmadi

This study, however, does not include Buddhist, Parsi (Zoroastrian), Jew, Jain, and Bahai women because of their tiny number and accessibility problems. Also, there is no violence or abuse highlighted by women from these communities. The team did reach out to the Bahai community, but they declined to participate in the study. The Ahmadi community members agreed to participate in the study only for the in-depth interviews.

The particular objectives of the study are as follows:

- To identify the social, political, and economic discriminations borne by women belonging specifically to religious minority communities
- To determine the specific needs of local women of such backgrounds that are missing from stakeholders' agenda

Desk Review

A comprehensive review of the extant literature and desk review was conducted to build a baseline understanding of a range of issues faced by minority women. The desk review guided the discussion topics in identifying the gaps in the existing knowledge and preparing for the FGDs and in-depth interviews. Religious minorities of Pakistan were studied to establish their context. Theoretical concepts of gender-conflict theory and women-focused intersectionality were reviewed. Efforts were made to examine the existing experiences of minority women in Pakistan. Finally, the study looks at Pakistan's progress on SDG No. 5, which aims to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" and implement CEDAW in Pakistan.

Data Collection

The research team conducted five FGDs and 15 in-depth interviews (roughly three each with the Christian, Scheduled Caste Hindu, Jati/Caste Hindu, and Sikh communities). Each of the 5 Focus Group Discussions took place with a different age group. In contrast, the In-Depth Interviews took place with key informants, i.e., local community leaders, activists, and other individuals who have a detailed understanding of the issues of minority women in Pakistan. The FGDs conducted were as follows age cohorts:

- FGD 1 with age group 19-25
- FGD 2 with age group 17-18
- FGD 3 with age group 12-16
- FGD 4 with age group 26-35
- FGD 5 with age group 36+

The FGD with women under 17 was conducted after obtaining parental consent. The FGD groups were divided based on the age of the minority and as perceived by different groups. More mature women who had worked with community women. Each FGD roughly had 15 participants and at least 3 participants from each targeted minority community, i.e., Christians, Caste Hindus, Scheduled Caste Hindus, and Sikhs. Participants from each community were further chosen from as diverse regions as possible. Specifically, the aim was to get the FGD participants from each community from the district specified against it as follows:

1. **Christians:** Lahore, Karachi, Mir Pur Khas, and Faisalabad
2. **Caste Hindus:** Umerkot, Peshawar, Hyderabad, and Mir Pur Khas
3. **Scheduled Caste Hindus:** Rahim Yar Khan, Umerkot, and Mithi
4. **Sikhs:** Nankana Sahib, Gujranwala, and Peshawar

The districts were chosen because the respective communities were most concentrated in them; moreover, the regional coordinators were given the flexibility to select participants from these districts. The FGDs were conducted online using Zoom Video Communications, Inc's video chat system for the following reasons:

1. A national representation of each community while keeping the budget in control.
2. Ensuring the quality of each FGD is consistent by having it conducted by the same facilitator.
3. Timely collection of the data and avoiding logistical arrangements.
4. Eliminate the risk of COVID-19 for the staff and participants.

However, the team reached most participants personally for the in-depth interviews, including those who could not participate in the FGDs. Only a few in-depth interviews were conducted via Zoom Video Communications, Inc's video chat systems.

The Participant Selection Criteria

The community coordinators identified minority neighbourhoods within the selected districts and then selected participants from these neighbourhoods. The selected women met the following criteria:

1. Have been closest to or have directly experienced incidences of violence or discrimination
2. Have a strong ability and confidence to articulate their thoughts and experiences, especially to a group of strangers
3. Have fluent speaking and listening abilities in Urdu (the most widely understood language)

The selection for the In-depth Interviews was made by reaching out to local leaders, community organisers, activists, and other individuals in CLJ's network who had a comprehensive understanding of the issues of minority women from their communities.

Outline of FGDs and the in-depth interviews

Community coordinators were provided with the questionnaire based on the SAC (South Asia Collective) guidelines and a Facilitator's Guide of instructions for the FGDs. Broadly, the FGDs cover the following topics:

- Experiences of religious discrimination
- Discrimination is faced due to customary practices, cultural beliefs, values, social norms, laws, or policies.
- Forms of violence or harassment experienced by minority women
- Experiences when engaging with local/national authorities
- Thoughts about converting to other/majority religions
- Incidences of abduction followed by forced conversion and marriage
- Experiences of discriminatory and/or biased words or name-calling
- Observance of religious customs that are not a part of their religion
- Awareness of community members about the presence of religious minorities in their neighbourhoods

- Particular roles minority women and girls are expected to conform to
- Ability to access places of worship and carry out peaceful religious activities
- Whether they feel that they are more likely to be accepted when they hide public manifestations of their religion
- The role religious institution/s have played in their lives
- How educational curriculums represent religious minority women
- Access to healthcare services
- Experiences of depression/anxiety
- Freedom to travel alone
- National Identity cards, voting, and minority women in public offices
- How the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their lives
- How they can contribute to improving the social, economic, political, cultural, and religious conditions of other minority women
- What role should be played by various stakeholders
- Highest priority threats that religious minority women and girls face

For the in-depth interviews, a similar list of topics was prepared, but it included questions related to policy-level solutions. Once the interviews and FGDs were conducted, the team prepared the transcripts of their recordings and used the content analysis approach to draw findings.² The following section discusses findings from the desk review and data analysis. The contextual analysis is built using the information from the desk review. At the same time, the discussion on the day-to-day lived experiences of minority women is based on the desk review and the findings drawn from the qualitative analysis of interviews and FGD transcripts.

² More specifically, a conventional content analysis approach was used that aims to describe a phenomenon, which in our case are the experiences of minority women in Pakistan. Under this approach, the researchers avoid using preconceived categories, instead allowing the categories and names for categories to flow from the data. Data analysis starts with reading all data repeatedly to achieve immersion and obtain a sense of the whole, after which they highlight the exact sentences from the text that appear to capture key thoughts or concepts. Next, the researcher approaches the text by making notes of his or her first impressions, thoughts, and initial analysis. More details can be found here: Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon, "Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis," *Qualitative Health Research* 15, no. 9 (November 1, 2005): 1277–88, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>.

The Pakistani Context

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is located in South Asia. It is the 5th most populous country with a multi-ethnic population of 229 million. Islam is its official religion. The ethnic groups include Punjabis (52.6%), Pashtuns (13.2%), Sindhis (11.7%), Urdu-speaking Muhajirs (7.5%) and Balochs (4.3%).³ Territorially, Pakistan is divided into five provinces which are Punjab (the most populous), Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Balochistan (the largest by area) and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). Each region has its government, and there is also a federal government that governs the federal territories, including Islamabad and is otherwise responsible for matters of interprovincial nature.

Pakistan's per capita GDP (PPP) stands at \$5,839 (which puts it in 139th place in the world in terms of wealth), and its citizens have an average life expectancy of 67.2 years and a medium HDI of 0.557 (putting it at 152nd place in terms of human development). Pakistan's area has long been a route for ancient and medieval era military conquest to India and other places and an entrepôt for peoples and cultures. Its history and migration experiences make it a significant cultural and ethnic melting pot.

Since its inception in 1947, the country has struggled to attain political stability and sustained social development. It has witnessed at least four military coups d'etat and has been under military rule for about half of its existence. The country has also experienced internal conflict due to the armed separatist movements of certain ethnic groups and violent terrorist groups that aim to coerce the Pakistani state into imposing the Shariah law. Pakistan has also fought at least three full-scale wars and has an antagonistic relationship with India. Pakistan came into being when British India was decolonised in 1947. This was in response to the demands of moderate Islamic nationalists, which were articulated by the All India Muslim League under the leadership of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who believed that India's Muslims would receive just representation only in their own country.

A Brief Overview of Religious Minority Communities in Pakistan

In terms of religion, Muslims make up 96.2% of the country's population. In contrast, the Hindus (Jati) are 1.6%, Christians 1.59%, Scheduled Castes Hindus 0.25%, Ahmadis 0.22%, and other religious minorities make up about 0.07% of the population.⁴ A brief overview of each of the minority groups is in order. It looks briefly at the basic demographics, geographical distribution, types of localities, occupational distribution, socioeconomic status, and ethnic/linguistic composition of each minority group. This overview is based on the work by Asif Aqeel.⁵

³ Lawrence Ziring and Shahid Javed Burki, "Pakistan," in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago, Illinois: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., December 31, 2021), <https://www.britannica.com/place/Pakistan>.

⁴ Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, "2017 Census: Population by Religion" (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2017), <https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files//tables/POPULATION%20BY%20RELIGION.pdf>.

⁵ Asif Aqeel, "The Index of Religious Diversity and Inclusion in Pakistan" (Lahore: Center for Law and Justice, February 2020), <http://www.clj.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/The-Index-of-Religious-Diversity-and-Inclusion-in-Pakistan.pdf>.

Christians

According to the 2017 census, Christians comprise 1.59 per cent out of 3.72 per cent of the total religious minorities in Pakistan. The Christian population is mainly located in Punjab and urban areas. Their ethnicity is mostly Punjabi as well. Although many still live in rural areas, migration to urban centres is still there. Many Christians in Pakistan are still uneducated and are involved in menial labour, such as sanitation work, domestic help, etc. They are seldom involved in highly educated working positions such as doctors, engineers, and professors. They also report being associated with sanitation work due to their religious faith. Most brick kiln workers, bonded labourers, and sanitation workers belong to the Christian faith and face deplorable working conditions in Pakistan. They have not had much success in entrepreneurship as they face shortcomings in running businesses due to their social and religious status.⁶

Hindus (Jati)

Hindus make up 1.6 per cent of the total population in Pakistan, according to the 2017 census. They are the most significant religious minority in Pakistan. They are primarily located in rural and urban regions of the Sindh Province. Hindus have a variety of languages, including Sindhi, Gujarati, Marwari, and Vaghri. They are mostly business owners, although they also have many educated professionals in their community. Upper caste Hindus relatively enjoy a higher socioeconomic status than other minorities and own many successful foods, cotton, and liquor industries. They have the most significant political representation and hold general assembly seats in the Sindh Assembly and the National Assembly.⁷

Scheduled Caste Hindus,

0.25 per cent of the total population is of scheduled caste Hindus, as per the 2017 census. Scheduled Caste Hindus are a part of the larger Hindu community who have a lesser socio-economic status than their upper-caste counterparts. They are also primarily settled in the Sindh Province. One community out of the scheduled caste Hindus, the Meghwar community, are distinguishably on a higher socioeconomic status and are highly educated and employed in respectable professions. However, the other Scheduled caste communities, such as Bheels and Kohlis, have an impoverished socioeconomic status and are associated with demeaning occupations such as sanitation and cobbling work. They are employed in menial and bonded labour in deplorable and exploitative working conditions.⁸

Sikhs

Before the partition, Sikhs were the third largest religious community after Muslims and Hindus in Punjab and other areas that now constitute Pakistan. Though there is no hard data available on their numbers because the recent census did not consider them, there were 8,852 registered Sikh voters, according to Election Commission Pakistan (ECP). They are situated all over Pakistan, across all provinces in central urban areas. Mostly, all Sikhs live in urban areas, mainly Nankana

⁶ Aqeel.

⁷ Aqeel.

⁸ Aqeel.

Sahib, Hasan Abdal, and Peshawar. Their ethnicity is Punjabi or Pashtun. It was found that they are mostly businessmen and have little interest in educational pursuits. Sikhs have reported that although the trend is changing, most of their youth have not completed matriculation as they are more interested in business. Consequently, they are not involved in educated working occupations.⁹

Ahmadis

Ahmadis constitute 0.22 percent of the total population of Pakistan, as per the 2017 census. Unofficial estimates show that their total population is four million. They are primarily situated in both rural and major urban regions of Sindh and Punjab, like Lahore, Faisalabad, and Karachi. Unlike most other religious minorities, they do not belong to any exclusive caste or ethnicity. Most of the Ahmadis have a high education level and are graduates. They have educated working professionals such as doctors, engineers, and professors. They also have no stigmatized occupation attached to their faith, and people from the Ahmadi community have successful businesses enterprises. It is important to note that Ahmadis consider themselves part of the broader Muslim community. However, Pakistani laws and society actively label them as minorities and exclude them from the broader Muslim label. The instances of persecution against Ahmadis are often perpetrated by laws and statutes specifically meant to target them.¹⁰

The Parsees (Zoroastrians)

The Parsees constitute a tiny population of religious minorities in Pakistan. Most recently, however, ECP (Election Commission Pakistan) announced 4,235 registered Parsee voters in Pakistan. Their socio-economic status is the most affluent out of all the religious minorities. They do not live in rural areas and are mainly located in Karachi, Lahore, Multan, and Rawalpindi. They are also employed in academic and respected professions. Some of the most lucrative businesses in Pakistan, such as Avari Hotel Chain and Murree Brewery, are owned by Parsees, and they prefer the business profession to civil services.¹¹

Baha'is

Baha'is are the fourth largest religious minority in Pakistan, with 31,543 registered voters. They do not belong to any particular ethnicity or caste. They work in high ranks in government and private sectors. Most Baha'i youths are educated and have completed intermediate-level education or graduation. They are employed in educated occupations of medical, engineering, and academia and unanimously report having no degrading occupation associated with their religious identity.¹²

⁹ Aqeel.

¹⁰ Aqeel.

¹¹ Aqeel.

¹² Aqeel.

Theoretical Perspectives on Intersectionality

Activists have widely used the concept of intersectionality to promote social and political egalitarianism. The term “Intersectionality” first gained currency among feminist theorists in the 2000s and 2010s and was formally entered into the Oxford English Dictionary in 2015. The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences notes that although intersectionality theory emerged in the 1970s during the ending phases of the second feminist wave, the idea’s roots can be traced back to a speech delivered by Sojourner Truth in 1851. At the 1851 Women’s Rights Conference in Akron, Ohio, Truth, a black woman and a formerly enslaved person, articulated how her identity was shaped not only by her gender but also by her race and class. However, the idea of intersectionality was popularised during the 1970s, and Combahee River Collective, a group of black feminist activists from Boston, is widely credited for first theorising the interconnections between gender, race, class, and sexuality.¹³

The term “Intersectionality” was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 paper for the University of Chicago Legal Forum. Using legal and theoretical evidence, Crenshaw argued that although Black women are at a double disadvantage by being black and a woman, the society perceives their discrimination as operating on a “single axis.” Hence, Crenshaw argued that the unique experience of Black women could not be subsumed under the general Black or the general woman experience. People who only experience one of these dimensions of discrimination, for example, Black men and white women, may come to dominate the social and political narratives on “the Black experience” and “the woman experience,” which ends up sidelining the combined experience of being a Black and a woman at the same time in the process.¹⁴

At its core, intersectionality is a qualitative analytic framework, though it has been used in quantitative analyses by scholars too.¹⁵ The framework seeks to understand how a person’s social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. Intersectionality as a concept is strictly opposed to any analytical system that treats each axis of oppression in isolation. The intersectionality theory differs any analysis that explains discrimination against black women as either racial discrimination or gender discrimination. Particularly concerning women and race in the USA, Crenshaw distinguishes between three different forms of intersectionality, i.e., structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality qualitatively looks at how non-white women experience domestic violence and rape differently from white women. Next, Political intersectionality explores how the laws and policies intended to increase gender equality can sometimes paradoxically undermine or overlook the experiences of non-white women. Finally,

¹³ IESS, “Intersectionality,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (Encyclopedia.com, December 28, 2021), <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/applied-and-social-sciences-magazines/intersectionality>.

¹⁴ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, “What Is Intersectionality?,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago, Illinois: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.), accessed January 3, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/story/what-is-intersectionality>.

¹⁵ See for example works by feminist economists like Marlene Kim, Rose M. Brewer, Cecelia A. Conrad, Mary C. King and Leslie McCall.

representational intersectionality is interested in pop culture's portrayals of women of colour and how it ends up obscuring their authentic lived experiences.¹⁶

Anna Carastathis has identified four analytic benefits of intersectionality as a research paradigm: simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility, and inclusivity.¹⁷ Carastathis explains simultaneity as follows: "since 'a real-life person is not, for example, a woman on Monday, a member of the working class on Tuesday, and a woman of African descent on Wednesday', intersectionality responds to the 'theoretical demand [...] to read these categories simultaneously'." On the other hand, complexity refers to its ability to account for or capture experiential and structural complexity rather than simply treating it as a monistic issue. Leslie McCall distinguishes between three kinds of complexity here: 1) the intercategory approach focuses on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories, 2) the intracategory approach examines complexity within a social group in order to reveal the complexity of lived experience' of their members. And 3) the anticategory approach is based on a methodology deconstructing analytical categories.¹⁸ Irreducibility is a corollary benefit to the simultaneity and complexity benefit; rather than reducing oppression to a particular category, intersectionality highlights "the interaction of multiple, decentered, and co-constitutive axes." This is why intersectionality has been subject to some criticism from Marxist feminists because of its focus on elements other than class. Finally, inclusivity refers to the ability of intersectionality to correct for white solipsism, heteronormativity, elitism, ableism and other hegemonic tendencies within the feminist theory and analysis.

Another vital scholar on intersectionality is Patricia Collins, who seeks to create frameworks to think about intersectionality rather than expanding on the theory itself. Collins explains that the cultural patterns of oppression are interrelated. More importantly, they are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender, socioeconomic class, and ethnicity.¹⁹ Along these lines, Collins differentiates between three paradigms or sets of concern when it comes to intersectionality: "(a) intersectionality as a field of study that is situated within the power relations that it studies; (b) intersectionality as an analytical strategy that provides new angles of vision on social phenomena; and (c) intersectionality as critical praxis that informs social justice projects."²⁰

Before moving forward, it is essential to examine some of the key criticisms of intersectionality as an analytical framework. First, the framework has been criticised for reducing individuals to mere demographic attributes. Such an argument has been advanced by Lisa Downing. She argues that

¹⁶ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

¹⁷ Anna Carastathis, "The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory," *Philosophy Compass* 9, no. 5 (2014): 304–14, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12129>.

¹⁸ Leslie McCall, "The Complexity of Intersectionality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30, no. 3 (March 1, 2005): 1771–1800, <https://doi.org/10.1086/426800>.

¹⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), <http://archive.org/details/blackfeministtho0000coll>.

²⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas," *Annual Review of Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2015): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142>.

the recent identity politics related trends advanced by the left-wing activists in the West, often under the banner of 'intersectionality,' have led to an over-simplified understanding which assumes that the demographics of gender, sexuality, class and race determine the political affiliation of individuals.²¹ Another criticism of intersectionality is its use as an ideological tool against other feminist theories, discussed in detail by Barbara Tomlinson.²² Finally, another persistent criticism of intersectionality is its lack of clearly defined intersectional methodology and its tendency to focus too much on the individual subjective experience, which often leads to contradictions and a lack of identification of common causes of oppression.²³ In response to these critiques, Brittney Cooper has argued that intersectionality is not an account of personal identity. Still, one of power does not necessarily have to fully attend to the contours of identity. Intersectionality is meant to listen to the problem of recognition (meaning how the operations of racism, sexism, and classism make them civically and juridically unknowable) rather than the problem of subjectivity. As an example, Cooper explains how the existing legal structures "recognise and provide property rights and protections for a standard white, male, property-owning, heterosexual, able-bodied subject. But bringing into view lives occluded by obtrusive structures, such as racism and sexism, does not then mean that the people living them are now known."²⁴

Review of Literature on Intersectionality in Pakistan

A limited number of studies have been produced regarding intersectionality in Pakistan. A cursory overview of these studies is to develop a general sense of the Pakistani scholarly landscape on intersectionality. The small number of studies cover a range of themes, and only one study has been produced on each of these themes. The themes covered by these studies include 1) gender and disability mainstreaming in a health-related development project²⁵; 2) intersectionalities of class, education, and gender among vulnerable rural communities during natural disasters²⁶; 3) intersectionalities in a co-production project that was intended to improve public safety inclusively²⁷; 4) intersectionality of age and social group and children's perception about social

²¹ Lisa Downing, "The Body Politic: Gender, the Right Wing and 'Identity Category Violations,'" *French Cultural Studies* 29, no. 4 (November 1, 2018): 367–77, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155818791075>.

²² Barbara Tomlinson, "To Tell the Truth and Not Get Trapped: Desire, Distance, and Intersectionality at the Scene of Argument," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (June 1, 2013): 993–1017, <https://doi.org/10.1086/669571>.

²³ Jennifer C. Nash, "Re-Thinking Intersectionality," *Feminist Review*, no. 89 (2008): 1–15.

²⁴ Brittney Cooper, "Intersectionality," in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.013.20>.

²⁵ Clara Fischer, "Intersectional Mainstreaming and Sightsavers' Lady Health Workers Programme in Pakistan," *Gender & Development* 20, no. 3 (November 1, 2012): 563–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552074.2012.731743>.

²⁶ Hassan Raza, "Using a Mixed Method Approach to Discuss the Intersectionalities of Class, Education, and Gender in Natural Disasters for Rural Vulnerable Communities in Pakistan," *Journal of Rural and Community Development* 12, no. 1 (2017): 128–48.

²⁷ Amiera Sawas et al., "Intersectional Coproduction and Infrastructural Violence: Experiences from Pakistan," *Community Development Journal* 55, no. 1 (February 4, 2020): 83–101, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsz027>.

boundaries²⁸; 5) intersectionalities of stigma, identity and culture as experienced by female escorts²⁹; 6) intersectionality of gender and the digital divide³⁰; 7) intersectionality of gender and power in organisations³¹; 8) intersectionalities in housing³², and 9) intersectionality of ethnic minority Hazara women.³³ Since these studies may not offer critical insights regarding the intersectionality of Pakistani minority women. Specifically, they were not reviewed in this desk review.

As far as the intersectionality of minority women in Pakistan is concerned, a few notable studies have been produced, which will be examined in detail in the next section.

Findings from the Desk Review and Analysis of Qualitative Data on Intersectionality & Experiences of Minority Women

There is a significant shortage of studies regarding minority women in Pakistan. Jennifer Jag Jivan and Peter Jacob did the first of these few studies.³⁴ In their study titled “Life at the Margins,” they explore the intersectionality (or Double Jeopardy as they call it) of women from religious minorities in Pakistan and take a comprehensive look at it. Using qualitative and quantitative data, they look at a range of areas, including health, water, hygiene and sanitation; socio-economic conditions; education; autonomy; political participation; discriminations such as forced and mediated conversions; laws related to loopholes, and law enforcement concerns and redress

²⁸ Muhammad A. Z. Mughal, “Children’s Perception of Social Boundaries: The Intersectionality of Age and Social Group Affiliation in Rural Pakistan,” *Children & Society* 35, no. 2 (2021): 213–28, <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12417>.

²⁹ Belinda Brooks-Gordon and Nasra Poli, “Intersectional Stigma, Identity, and Culture: A Grounded Theory of Female Escort Perspectives from Brazil and Pakistan,” *Preprints*, September 15, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.20944/preprints202009.0329.v1>.

³⁰ Zoya Rehman, Hija Kamran, and Zoha Batool Khan, “Women Disconnected: Feminist Case Studies on the Gender Digital Divide Amidst COVID-19” (Islamabad: Media Matters for Democracy, January 2021), <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Women-Disconnected-Gender-Digital-Divide-in-Pakistan.pdf>.

³¹ Mariam Mohsin and Saman Nazir, “The Internal Outsiders: A Standpoint and Intersectional Perspective on Gender and Power in Organisations” (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, 2021), <https://pide.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/wb-0210-the-internal-outsiders-a-standpoint-and-intersectional-perspective-on-gender-and-powerin-organisations.pdf>.

³² Faisal Munir et al., “Understanding Housing Inequalities in Urban Pakistan: An Intersectionality Perspective of Ethnicity, Income and Education,” *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and the City* 0, no. 0 (November 5, 2021): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/26884674.2021.1986442>.

³³ Sadiqa Sultan, Maryam Kanwer, and Jaffer Abbas Mirza, “The Multi-Layered Minority: Exploring the Intersection of Gender, Class and Religious-Ethnic Affiliation in the Marginalisation of Hazara Women in Pakistan” (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, December 2020), <https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2020.005>.

³⁴ Jennifer Jag Jivan and Peter Jacob, “Life on the Margins: A Study on the Minority Women in Pakistan” (Lahore, Pakistan: National Commission of Justice and Peace, 2012), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/811_lifemargins_/811_lifemargins_en.pdf.

options. Their analysis is based on the data from about 1000 Christian and Hindu respondents in Punjab and Sindh, the most populous provinces of Pakistan, where most religious minorities live. Though it is not clear from their report if the survey responses were collected based on random sampling or whether the sampling is purely convenience based. Since the report makes no mention of any randomisation strategies employed, it may be concluded that the data collected by Jivan and Jacob is based on convenience sampling. Hence, its quantitative results may not be generalised to the overall population of the minority women in Pakistan. However, some of the specific quantitative results will be discussed under the respective themes explored in this section. Overall, the authors conclude that while minority women fared better than majority women on some gender-based development indicators, they were subject to the same constraints regarding personal autonomy.

Another notable study in this area is by Ayra Patras, who explores the situation of female Christian sanitation workers in Lahore.³⁵ In her dissertation, Patras conducts in-depth interviews of women sweepers to examine their perceptions of female sweepers about their occupational challenges, their responding strategies, educational conditions, and their children's career aspirations. The study also looks at their understanding of equal citizenship and its relevance to their minority religious identity. Patras' thesis examines the intersectionality of Christian sanitation workers and a number of axes, including religion, work, caste, class, skin colour, and gender bias. Patras's more specific conclusions will be discussed under the respective themes explored in this section.

Apart from these two notable studies on minority women in Pakistan, four studies have been recently published by the University of Sussex's Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The studies were produced under IDS' Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) program and explored the intersectionality of Ahmadi, Christian, Hindu, and Hazara (an ethnic minority) women. The study on Ahmadi women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds was authored by M. K. (the author's name was anonymised due to security concerns). It aimed to explore the experiences and issues and examine how these issues are perceived in the process.³⁶ The study is primarily based on the participatory ranking methodology, and though the study focuses on Ahmadi women, it collects data from Ahmadi men. K's research finds that state-sanctioned persecution was the top concern among both Ahmadi men and women, and it was also considered the root cause for all other issues faced by their community. The author notes that Ahmadi women from poor socioeconomic backgrounds hide their religious identity and often remain silent about any kind of oppression they might experience. Using the lens of intersectionality, K explains how the poverty and faith-based identity of Ahmadi women generate a synergic effect as their faith makes them subject to persecution. Their poverty makes them more vulnerable and sometimes incapable of escaping persecution. The paper finds that Ahmadi

³⁵ Ayra Indrias Patras, "Perspectives from the Margins: A Case of Christian Female Sweepers in Lahore" (Lahore, Pakistan, University of the Punjab, 2019), http://pr.hec.gov.pk/jspui/bitstream/123456789/15881/1/Ayra%20Indrias%20Patras%202020%20gender%20studies%20uop%20lhr%20%282021_02_17%2008_38_22%20UTC%29.pdf.

³⁶ M K, "Gender-Based Perspectives on Key Issues Facing Poor Ahmadi Women in Pakistan" (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, December 2020), <https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2020.008>.

women are marginalised across most aspects of their lives, including religious, cultural, social, economic, legal, constitutional, and judicial contexts.

Another CREID study is on the intersectionality of Hindu women from poor socioeconomic backgrounds in Karachi. In this study, Seema Maheshwary explores the discrimination experienced by Hindu women from their perspectives, particularly at the intersection of gender and economic exclusion.³⁷ The topics explored by Maheshwary include religious discrimination, sexual harassment, access to education, dress, appearance, mobility, employment, and other topics. A more detailed review of this study's findings will be presented under the following themes.

Naumana Suleman authored CREID's study on the intersectionality of Christian women.³⁸ This study attempts to highlight the experiences of Christian women, particularly along the axes of social exclusion, economic marginalisation, religious discrimination, and gender inequality. Suleman finds that poor minority Christian women and girls face multiple intersecting forms of discrimination, which are in addition to those faced by average Pakistani women.

The following section discusses the experiences of minority women under several specific themes of interest. The discussion will be based on the desk review findings, the qualitative analysis of FGDs, and In-depth Interviews conducted for this study.

Theme 1: Experiences of harassment, discrimination, and violence

Findings from the desk review

The religious minority women in Pakistan, like the ones from the majority faith, experience various forms of violence, discrimination or harassment. Their minority religion, however, creates intersectionality that leads to a situation where they are likely to experience violence, discrimination or harassment with greater intensity (though quantitative empirical evidence is required to establish this claim with complete certainty). Of the minority women interviewed for Jivan and Jacob's study, at least 43% reported that they or one of their family members suffered some religious discrimination. They note that most of these incidences of discrimination took place in the workspace (40%), whereas the educational institutions (24%) and women's neighbourhoods (18%) were also the leading hotspots.³⁹ It is important to note here that the quantitative results drawn by Jivan and Jacob's study may not be generalised to the overall population of minority women in Pakistan. However, they can give us a feel of their situation. Patras also documents some stories of discrimination, violence and harassment of Christian

³⁷ Seema Rana Maheshwary, "Poor Marginalised Hindu Women in Pakistan" (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, December 2020), <https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2020.006>.

³⁸ Naumana Suleman, "A Case of Several Jeopardies: A Study on the Intersecting Inequalities in the Everyday Lives of Poor Minority Christian Women and Girls in Pakistan" (Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, December 2020), <https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2020.007>.

³⁹ Jivan and Jacob, "Life on the Margins: A Study on the Minority Women in Pakistan."

sanitation workers and emphasises the phenomenon of victim-blaming in these instances, along with the interplay of caste and socioeconomic class, which further exacerbate these experiences.⁴⁰ Suleman's study also captures Christian women's experiences of violence in forced conversions and domestic violence. At least 17% of Suleman's respondents report domestic violence incidents, while she observes a general hesitancy in discussing matters of domestic violence for the remaining respondents.⁴¹

Similar to the case of Christian women, K also finds intersectionality at play when it comes to the experiences of violence and harassment of Ahmadi women. K notes that Ahmadi women experience more violence and harassment than other women from poor socioeconomic backgrounds, mainly because they are often not protected by authorities and are under constant threat of violence or harassment by the majority community. Such an experience of harassment, violence and discrimination stands out compared to all other religious minority groups in Pakistan.⁴²

In the case of Hindu women in Karachi, Seema Maheshwary also documents bullying, violence and sexual harassment against Hindu women in public and workplaces, mainly because of their dress and appearance. Hindu women are often required to wear Saari and Ghagra-Choli, Sindoor, Mangal-Sootar, and Bindiya, which makes them identifiable as Hindu women and thus vulnerable to violence and harassment. Maheshwary notes that harassment and discrimination are a cross-cutting theme which affects all aspects of Hindu women's lives, including freedom of mobility, job and employment opportunities, and their ability to worship freely. Muslim men refer to the traditional Hindu women's clothing, which exposes the stomach and neck, as 'naked clothes.' The sexual harassment of Hindu women in Karachi was especially prevalent on public transport. Several interview participants reported experiencing stares and offensive gestures such as asking for their contact numbers in sign language.⁴³

It is essential to explore some sociocultural factors regarding violence against minority women. Faiza Tayyab has done significant work in this area in her dissertation. She reflects on the perceptions and experiences of Christian and Muslim women residing in Punjab's urban and rural areas around domestic violence. The study compares the sociocultural conditions of the Christian and Muslim women to understand the complex trajectories of family relations and the phenomenon of domestic violence. Tayyab finds that domestic violence occurs due to its private nature and a widespread culture that normalises violence against women as a means to keep them obedient and subordinate. An obedient and subordinate woman appears to be a widely espoused cultural ideal. For our intents and purposes, Tayyab demonstrates how women's intersecting identities have implications for Christian women who carry additional burdens due to their minority status alongside the unamended laws that increase their exploitation. Tayyab's

⁴⁰ Patras, "Perspectives from the Margins: A Case of Christian Female Sweepers in Lahore," 119–24.

⁴¹ Suleman, "A Case of Several Jeopardies."

⁴² K, "Gender-Based Perspectives on Key Issues Facing Poor Ahmadi Women in Pakistan."

⁴³ Maheshwary, "Poor Marginalised Hindu Women in Pakistan," 12–14.

findings could be extended to other minority women who share similar contexts and backgrounds.⁴⁴

Findings from the data collected

Several important observations were made by analysing participants' responses. Pakistan's hyper-religious and fundamentalist trends harmed the religious minorities and the society itself.⁴⁵ Most Christian and Hindu participants from remote and rural areas reported experiences of untouchability. Most of these instances of discrimination and harassment are first experienced by minority women at school, at the hands of their classmates and teachers. They reported that Muslim colleagues or class fellows often preferred not to eat or drink with them.

Participants also said they were usually served separate utensils if their non-Muslim identity was revealed. Many of their colleagues explicitly stated that they wanted to stay away from them because being in contact with a non-Muslim might defile them. For example, a Christian participant from Faisalabad reported experiences of untouchability in her school, which was a Christian missionary school. She explains how there were separate water coolers for non-Muslims and how non-Muslims were asked to form separate lines to get food from the cafeteria and how they were served in separate utensils. She says it was normal then, and eventually, this practice was abolished. As reported by the participants, almost all of the instances of discrimination, prejudice, or social ostracisation took place at educational institutions and workplaces. Many young participants reported how they and their Muslim class fellows preferred to make friends with people from their religious community. Young minority women said that the prejudice against them often manifested in the differential treatment that they received at the hands of their teachers, who tend to give them fewer marks and prefer Muslim students over them for class and extracurricular activities. A Christian participant said she often felt that students from minority communities suffer more corporal punishment than Muslim students and nothing happens when they report it.

The instances of discrimination and prejudice very often turn into outright bullying, name-calling and harassment. Christian women participants reported that they were often called derogatory terms like "*Churi*." *In contrast, the Hindu participants from interior Sindh reported being called derogatory terms like "Vaiyaani."* A Hindu participant explains how her younger cousin was admitted to a school where she was bullied by her classmates for "worshipping idols" and being "Kafir (infidel)," and how she came back home and asked her father, "are we Kafir and will we go to hell?" This discriminatory behaviour of the Muslim community towards minority women is often motivated by their belief that their religion is the only true religion and that all other religions are false. They believe that anyone who believes in any other religion except Islam is a sinner and will go to hell in the afterlife. Participants even reported that people from the Muslim community sometimes try to debate and argue with them on religious topics to prove that their religion is false

⁴⁴ Faiza Tayyab, "Women's Perceptions and Experiences of Domestic Violence in Punjab, Pakistan" (PhD, Leeds, University of Leeds, 2021), <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/29607/>.

⁴⁵ FIDH & HRCP, "Minorities under Attack: Faith-Based Discrimination and Violence in Pakistan" (Paris: FIDH (International Federation for Human Rights) & HRCP (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan), February 2015), https://doi.org/10.1163/2210-7975_HRD-0035-2015003.

and their religious practices are sinful. Most participants agreed that they often find people who believe only Muslims can do good things and that the other communities are inherently evil. One participant explained how her Muslim acquaintance once told her that one day only Muslims would remain on the Earth and people from all other religions would be gone, which is a narrative that Islamic religious leaders often propagate.

Another consistent trend reported by most women participants was how their parents tell them to avoid confrontation and not to report instances of discrimination, bias, harassment or bullying because they could be targeted with blasphemy laws. Since they are vulnerable to being a minority, society could target them in retaliation.

An essential prerequisite before any prejudice or practice of segregation (i.e., serving non-Muslims with separate utensils and avoiding physical contact with them), discrimination, harassment, or bullying, could occur at the victim's identification as a non-Muslim. In most social settings, minority women were identified by their names (i.e., when the women had Christian or Hindu sounding names), skin tone or facial features (Christians and Scheduled Caste Hindus tend to have darker skin and somewhat distinct facial features). In the case of interior Sindh Hindu women by their dresses such as Lehenga (an ankle-length Indian skirt). It is customary and often mandatory for Hindu women from interior Sindh to wear Lehenga after their marriage, which often gets them easily identified in public and thus subject to discrimination. Once they are identified, they are vulnerable to discriminatory treatment in public. One participant noted that Dalit Hindu women are sometimes not deemed worthy of proper medical attention by the doctors in hospitals. These women are harassed and purposely ignored on buses and public transport. While some minority women would prefer to hide their religious identity in public whenever possible, a few minority women participants explained how they displayed their religious symbols or recited their prayers, songs or verses at the workplaces before their Muslim colleagues often object to it.

Several factors were noted that play a pivotal role in the differential experiences of discrimination among minority women. Participants reported that they experienced less prejudice and religious bias at college compared to school. In college, discriminatory treatment was meted out by Islamic studies teachers. An interviewee who is also a senior journalist explained how the variance in nature and extent of discrimination experienced by minority women is highly dependent on the difference in privileges in terms of education, social standing, and wealth. Another critical factor is how remote or mainstream the context is. For example, a Sikh participant from Islamabad notes that she never experienced discrimination, which shows that discrimination is more prevalent in remote areas and less prevalent in metropolitans. She says this could be because people in Islamabad are more educated and don't have a biased mentality. Districts with large minority populations also experience less discrimination. Socio-economic status and caste play a significant role in exacerbating the extent of discrimination and harassment faced by minority women, which is apparent in the case of Scheduled caste women. A participant from Umerkot (a district with a large population of religious minorities) also shares the positive attitude of her Muslim friends towards her religion. Participants also reported instances of harassment in online spaces, and they noted how their class fellows, with impunity, target women from minority

backgrounds. The Sikh women participants' experiences of discrimination were a little less severe. However, they are sometimes thought of as dim-witted and cheeky.

The Ahmadi women's experiences were undoubtedly much more severe than all other minority groups examined in this study. Ahmadi women face discriminatory attitudes at workplaces, educational institutes and marketplaces. If it ever becomes known that the customer is an Ahmadi, the shopkeepers will refuse to sell them things at marketplaces. For this purpose, when Ahmadi women go to bazaars, they change their outfits from the style of *niqab* and *burqa* that is typical to their community to the style worn by Muslim women. When applying for public sector jobs, Ahmadi women report that a specific column often inquires about religion. It is illegal for Ahmadis to declare themselves Muslims, so they cannot tick the Muslim box. They are not hired if they tick the Ahmadi box because discrimination against Ahmadis is often unfettered. For example, an interviewee tells about her situation when she was promoted to head of the school she worked in as a teacher. Word spread that she was an Ahmadi, and the situation escalated to a point where she had to resign from the school and look out for her safety.

Making incendiary remarks and demonising the Ahmadi community is a commonly observed trend in Pakistan. One interviewee, for example, says that in school, her Islamic studies teacher used to speak ill of the head of the Ahmadi community in the class, which would hurt her, and she eventually left the class in silent protest. In small towns of Pakistan, where there are close-knit communities, Ahmadis are easily recognised and often stopped from using public transport. "People get angry if we enter the bus and don't like to sit with us," says an Ahmadi interviewee.

Like Christians, Hindus and Sikhs, a critical pre-requisite before any prejudice, discrimination, harassment, or bullying can occur against Ahmadis is that they must be identified as an Ahmadi. However, identifying an Ahmadi by appearance or name is difficult as they have a similar appearance, dress style, and names as the majority Muslim community. Ahmadi women can be identified if they wear a specific *burka* or *niqab* style typical to them or if they choose to reveal their identity.

Theme 2: Negative experiences around customary practices, cultural beliefs, values, social norms, laws, legal system, LEAs, and policies

Findings from the desk review

Among the studies reviewed in this desk review, Seema Maheshwary explicitly notes an instance of customary practices leading to harassment of Hindu women in Karachi. As per the customs of the Hindu religion, married women are mainly required to wear a *Sari* and *Ghagra-Choli*, along with *Sindoor*, *Mangal-Sootar*, and *Bindiya*, which makes them stand out in public and thus, vulnerable to harassment. Certain cultural beliefs, values, social norms, and customary practices

exist in remote regions like interior Sindh or southern Punjab, limiting women's freedom.⁴⁶ There is a widespread belief that women are associated with honour and considered inferior to men.⁴⁷

In the case of the Christian community specifically, the laws only allowed divorce on the grounds of adultery, which is based on the conservative interpretation of Christian doctrines. Many Christian women are trapped in abusive marriages and suffer from these laws.⁴⁸ In 2017, the Lahore High Court restored section 7 of the Christian Divorce Act 1869, which allowed Christian couples to seek divorce on grounds other than adultery. The court also ordered the government to prepare legislation that resolved the Christian divorce laws controversy. However, the progress on this order has since been lacklustre.⁴⁹ Ayra Patras and Ahmed Usman have captured the intersectional experience of Christian women on this matter.⁵⁰

Laws for the protection and empowerment of minorities currently in place in the legal framework of Pakistan do not include any specific provision regarding minority women. There are, however, several constitutional provisions ratified by the legislation of Pakistan that aim to sustain the freedom of religious beliefs and expressions and the rights of minorities. In addition to being a signatory party to several conventions on human rights of the United Nations general assembly, the Pakistani legislature has introduced a few provisions and acts in its constitution that seek to protect and empower minorities. These include measures and strategies to alleviate the oppressive and violent practices against women prevalent in Pakistan, such as acid attacks, customary tribal practices, sexual assault, cyber harassment, child marriages, workplace harassment, etc. Likewise, a national commission for minorities and a provincial Minorities Affairs and Human Rights Punjab department work towards achieving religious tolerance and interfaith harmony. There are also laws and government departments exclusive to the provincial assembly and its legislation that seek to protect and empower women in many different aspects. Despite sufficient constitutional provisions in place and ratification of international human rights conventions, there is a significant failure in implementing these provisions due to shortcomings on the part of the Pakistani judicial system and administrative bodies. The justice system of Pakistan is pluralistic and consists of many informal bodies, such as the Jirga system, which entails tribal courts widespread in rural areas of the country, and the Islamic Sharia courts. These alternate judicial mechanisms are primarily governed by influential people and conservative cultural norms that perpetrate criminal offences and violent retribution against women, such as

⁴⁶ The word freedom implies the concept described by the Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen. For more details see: Denis O'Hearn, "Amartya Sen's Development as Freedom: Ten Years Later," *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review* 8 (Spring 2009), <https://www.developmenteducationreview.com/issue/issue-8/amartya-sens-development-freedom-ten-years-later>.

⁴⁷ Tayyab, "Women's Perceptions and Experiences of Domestic Violence in Punjab, Pakistan."

⁴⁸ Asif Aqeel, "Why Divorce Is Close to Impossible for Christians in Pakistan," *Herald Magazine*, July 25, 2016, <http://herald.dawn.com/news/1153471>.

⁴⁹ Correspondent, "LHC Seeks Progress Report on Christian Divorce Laws," *The Express Tribune*, October 18, 2018, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/1829113/lhc-seeks-progress-report-christian-divorce-laws>.

⁵⁰ Ayra Indrias Patras and Ahmed Usman, "Adultery, the Ground for Dissolution of Christian Marriage in Pakistan: Intersectional Constraint to Christian Women in Pakistan," *Pakistan Perspectives* 24, no. 2 (July 2020), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3652282>.

honour killings, rape as punishment, and child marriages.⁵¹ Regardless of whether these justice systems are factually based on literal Islamic teachings, religion is a primary tool exploited to justify and uphold them. Furthermore, the formal legal system of Pakistan is incompetent in rectifying these parallel forms of justice systems due to corruption and hegemonic social control through rigid and misinterpreted religious doctrine. The governmental legal system also shows numerous inefficiencies and delays in the judicial process, leading to poor implementation of pro-women and minority protection laws.

Findings from the data collected

The insights gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions reveal several significant trends not captured thus far. Most Christian and Hindu participants agreed that it was common not to give women a share in inheritance in their communities. Although Christian and Hindu personal family laws have provisions for an equal share of women in the family inheritance, these laws are rarely implemented. Participants agreed that minority women also have a limited understanding of inheritance, which often leads to their exclusion from the inheritance of family wealth. This practice is similar to the experience of Muslim women in Pakistan, who are often not given any share in family inheritance despite Muslim family laws requiring it.

Another experience that minority women share with the majority women is the persistent practice of moral policing, both by their community members and people from the majority community. For example, a Christian participant explained how Christian girls are sometimes scrutinised by the Muslim community because of their religious customs and how they pray, dress, walk, or talk. Another participant noted that she made sure to wear a scarf during her school life out of the fear that her Muslim friends might say that she does not wear a hijab because of her religion. Since she does not observe purdah, her character and honour are under question - such a narrative is often widely prevalent in remote and rural Pakistan. Christian participants agreed that when they wear jeans, the Muslim men pass comments that imply they are lewd because they wear tight pants.

On the other hand, Hindu women must wear a lehenga as part of their customary practices, which often invites negative attitudes from society. One participant explained that her mother often wears a lehenga (an Indian dress). She is often treated in a discriminatory manner, and people usually do not want to sit near her because they readily recognise that she is a Hindu. A Hindu participant made an exciting observation saying that women from the Christian community get exposure. They can usually go outside their homes to get the education or do jobs because they wear shalwar kameez. Still, Hindu girls have to wear Lehenga after getting married, due to which they are often restricted to their homes and not allowed to get an education or do jobs.

Another critical aspect of the minority women's situation can be observed in the experience of being a single mother. Like the women from the majority community, single mothers from the minority communities often face negative comments, attitudes and behaviours. One single

⁵¹ Sania Muneer, "Pro-Women Laws in Pakistan: Challenges towards Implementation," *Journal of Pakistan Vision* 18, no. 2 (2017): 86–101.

mother, for example, explained that the fact that she is divorced and lives alone with her children often invites scorn and other inappropriate behaviours from people. She explained how people often make stories about her to put her character under question. Another participant noted that people often scorn them whenever she laughs because they believe that a divorced woman should not be happy.

The marriage laws of the Christian, Sikh, and Hindu communities do not provide women with financial security if they divorce. This is an issue that the participants had limited knowledge about. Most of what was learned about these issues was through discussions and interviews with informed individuals from these communities. In particular, these informed individuals confirmed that lack of provisions for financial security in case of divorce often meant that minority women either remained in abusive relationships out of fear of losing sustenance and shelter, or they were left at the mercy of their relatives and family to provide for their basic needs.

Early marriages of girls in the Scheduled Caste Hindu communities is another customary practice that has not yet been documented by the literature but was discussed by a participant who was a known civil society activist in her community. For example, in the Kohli community (a Scheduled Caste community), girls are married off as early as 9-10 years to reduce their financial burdens. However, more details are needed about the specific context of Scheduled Caste communities in which this practice is prevalent.

A general distrust of the justice system and law enforcement system was also noted among the participants. Just like women from the majority community, the minority women reported that they were often hesitant to seek the support of law enforcement agencies and courts in cases of harassment and violence because of massive incompetencies, delays, bureaucratic hurdles, and bribes that have to be paid. Participants also discussed how the legal system almost always fails to deliver justice in forced conversions because of the prevalent inefficiencies and the bias among law enforcement officials and court officials. The police, judiciary and media act biased in forced conversion to facilitate and enable the conversion of minority women to Islam. Interviewees from the Scheduled Caste Hindu communities notably stated that the law enforcement agencies and government authorities do not deliver justice to their people. So they do not expect that their issues will be addressed if reported to the authorities. That is why Scheduled Caste women do not report instances of harassment because they have a lot to lose, and they have no hope for justice by the legal system. Like women from the majority community, most participants agreed that cases are highlighted, and action is taken when people have money and status. Since Scheduled Caste people do not have that, their problems are not given due attention and remain unaddressed.

Contrary to the experiences of Christian and Hindu participants, the Sikh participants stated that law enforcement agencies respond more efficiently to cases of forced conversion or elopement in Nankana Sahib than in Peshawar, which again has to do with the fact that Nankana Sahib has a sizable Sikh population. Participants from the Sikh community also stated that people, especially the Muslim community, are often interested in their festivals, customs, and rituals. They are frequently asked questions about it to the level that they get uncomfortable.

Christian, Sikh and Hindu participants also discussed how the job and education quota [affirmative action admission] has been approved for minorities but is yet to be implemented. This, in their view, is a significant opportunity for their success and prosperity, which the government still keeps away from them.

The experiences of Ahmadi women were again much worse than those of other minority groups. Numerous laws explicitly target the Ahmadi community with impunity. One Ahmadi interviewee, for example, explained how when government officials get hold of a document that reveals their identity, they start creating unnecessary hurdles to make their lives more difficult. Ahmadis mostly prefer not to disclose their identity to avoid discriminatory behaviour and attitudes, but government organisations often put requirements to ensure that Ahmadis are identified. However, during the interviews, no specific customary practice or social norm that oppresses Ahmadi women.

Theme 3: Experiences around conversion or forced conversion of religion

Findings from the desk review

The forced conversion and marriage cases of minority women and girls are often reported and widely debated on social media and the public. Asif Aqeel, however, notes that chances of forced conversion are only observed among women from Christian, Hindu and sometimes Sikh communities. Mainly, women who fall victim to forced conversion are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.⁵² This is further confirmed by M.K.'s study, which does not mention any instance of forced conversion and marriage among Ahmadi women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.⁵³ It is also interesting to note here that in most forced conversion of women, the conversion is almost always followed by marriage, usually with a man from the majority community that is twice the woman's age. However, the reasons behind these observed patterns are yet to be explored. The literature documents numerous cases of forced conversion and attempts to capture the mechanisms and standard practices in these cases. A working paper by Peter Jacob attempts to capture these patterns of forced conversion,⁵⁴ some of which are noted below:

- “Conversion involves a minor or a dependent, social or economic subordinate.
- Converted [women] had to live away from their natural family or guardians on the pretext of conversion/marriage.
- The accused/defendant manipulates legal procedures by attempting to avoid, influence or interferes with the investigation procedures; avoid or influence judicial proceeding by

⁵² Aqeel, “The Index of Religious Diversity and Inclusion in Pakistan.”

⁵³ K, “Gender-Based Perspectives on Key Issues Facing Poor Ahmadi Women in Pakistan.”

⁵⁴ Peter Jacob, “Silence of the Lamb II: Tackling the Uncomfortable Truth of Forced Conversions” (Lahore, Pakistan: Centre for Social Justice & Peoples Commission for Minorities Rights, November 2019), [http://csjpak.org/pdf/Working%20Paper%20on%20Forced%20Conversions%20\(English\).pdf](http://csjpak.org/pdf/Working%20Paper%20on%20Forced%20Conversions%20(English).pdf).

absenting himself; gathering a mob during hearings; avoiding jurisdiction of the concerned court; levelling unreasonable allegations of threats to life; producing conversion certificate and affidavits without legal basis; avoiding, counterfeiting, tampering or interfering with the examination of records of union council, school and church, NADRA etc.

- The kidnapped girl, often minor, sometimes illiterate, is forced or allured to sign an affidavit of conversion and the marriage papers. These papers become a legal defence in any investigation or prosecution to claim that the faith conversion was out of free will. The abducted girl faces intimidation, etc. and is denied contact with her family on the pretext that she is no longer allowed by her husband to make contact with the family.
- The conservative belief that converting someone to Islam entails Sawab (heavenly reward) may be why the government and police show lethargy when it comes to cracking down on cases of forced conversions in Pakistan. Mass conversions sponsored by wealthy patrons and clerics are common.
- The court inquiry ignores or fails to; critically examine the marriage certificate, ascertaining the age of the victim and the exercise of free will, and the absence of coercion. It also fails to cross-check the evidence of age and conversion and the party's profile.
- The courts fail to examine the marital status or inquire about the consent of the first wife or are misinformed about it.”

Overall, these trends indicate a general bias in the social and legal system that facilitates the forced conversion of minority women. Although there is a shortage of data regarding cases of forced conversions, the National Commission of Justice and Peace (NCJP) observed that 1,733 faith conversions had been reported in the press between 2000 and 2012. The number of cases of forced conversion in each community is as follows: Hindu (726), Christian (605), Ahmadi (384), Sikh (3) and Kalashiya (2).⁵⁵ It is interesting to note that even though both Asif Aqeel and M.K., in their interviews with members of the Ahmadi community, find no mention of forced conversion, the cases compiled by NCJP do find such instances. Moreover, the statistics reported by NCJP come with a caveat. Not all cases of forced conversion are likely reported to or come to the attention of the press. Hence, these statistics are likely to underestimate the number of forced conversion incidents among minority women.

Findings from the data collected

Most FGDs and interviews consistently report it was the invitation and often invasive requests to convert to Islam. According to the participants, most Muslims believe that all non-Muslims are meant to go to hell in the afterlife and that the only way to save them is to convert them to Islam. These invitations to convert to Islam range from polite invitations to outright threats and blackmail. Most participants reported discomfort, awkwardness and outright offence at these invitations. Many participants said that at educational institutes and workplaces, whenever someone finds out that they are non-Muslim, their first response is to ask them to convert. Several participants also reported that whenever their Muslim colleagues develop a liking for them over time, they often say, “you are such a good person, you should be a Muslim, you should convert to Islam.” It

⁵⁵ Kalashiya are an ethno-religious minority in Pakistan. More details available here: <https://www.worldhistory.org/Kalasha/>

was also noted that such a trend for inviting minority women to convert to Islam was concentrated mainly in Pakistan's remote and far-flung areas. Participants from the major cities of Pakistan reported less of such incidents than participants from rural and remote towns.

Some participants report that efforts to convert them to Islam are incredibly intense during Islamic studies classes in educational settings. A Christian participant, for example, explains that during the Islamic studies classes, her Muslim class fellows asked her to recite the first *Kalma* [a Muslim affirmation of faith, which is part of the Islamic studies coursework]. When she did, they started teasing her and claiming that she was a Muslim now.

One Christian victim of forced conversion was also interviewed during the study. The participant noted that cases of forced conversion often have much public interest, and it is challenging to keep these cases low profile. The most critical motivation appears to be the incentive to convert a non-Muslim to Islam. The chances of forced conversion are especially problematic when the woman involved is a minor. Most minor victims of forced conversion often state in courts that they have willingly converted.

In contrast, their community and families claim that either the minor victim has been threatened or that the victim is too young to make any decision about her religion or faith. One interviewee observed that one of the reasons behind forced conversions is that parents become negligent with who has access to their children. These children are then brainwashed into conversion to Islam. Another interviewee noted that it is primarily young girls who are converted because they are easy targets; older women transforming is not often heard of.

“A religious motivation is there; that if a Muslim converts a non-believer, they shall be granted heaven. It is all about heaven. You will not be interrogated about anything when you turn a non-believer into a Muslim when you die. You have earned heaven. It is a religious factor, and a girl is an easy target.” -A Hindu interviewee.

The issue of forced conversion has further negative consequences for minority women. Participants from the Sikh and Dalit Hindu communities, for example, observed that women in their community are often discouraged from going to school out of fear that they might become victims of forced conversions. Participants also pointed out that the Child Marriage Restriction Act 1929 is overlooked for minority girls and their forced conversion cases due to the narrative that once a girl has entered Islam, she cannot go back to her previous religion. One interviewee also noted an interesting pattern that cases of forced conversions do not happen in areas like Rawalpindi and Islamabad and occur mostly in neighbourhoods or communities with low education and development, where the environment is repressed and backward. Some participants also noted that on the rural side, girls convert and marry to improve their social and financial status. They do not have money for basic life necessities, so they get involved with well-off men who are usually Muslim. Finally, Ahmadi participants believed that forced conversions of their women were unheard of, and it was a phenomenon observed in other communities.

Theme 4: Social expectations and perceptions about minority women

Findings from the desk review

Very limited literature is available on the social expectations and perceptions attached to minority women in Pakistan. Of all the studies reviewed for this paper, only Seema Maheshwary documents the social expectations attached to Hindu minority women. She notes that “Hindu women of different sub-communities are expected to fulfil certain jobs that their communities have traditionally followed for decades.” For example, Hindu women from the Marwari community⁵⁶ are expected to sell dried fruits in different public and market areas on the roadsides. Maheshwary writes that engaging in this occupation has a positive and a negative side. When the Marwari women work together in groups, they can move around the town more freely and thus have less restricted mobility. However, the negative side is that “women are not allowed to try other occupations or get an education. If they try to change jobs, they are accused of disturbing domestic and married life throughout the community.”⁵⁷ Apart from the Marwari community, women from other Hindu sub-communities are also expected to conform to specific occupational roles. Women from many other Hindu communities are expected to work as maids and different sub-communities. Almost all the men and women are employed as sweepers in government and private sectors. Apart from Maheshwary, no other study mentioned any perceptions or expectations attached to minority women. Hence, more information about this question will be gathered during the qualitative data collection.

Suleman also notes how Christian women from meagre socioeconomic backgrounds are expected to adopt specific occupational roles. “The majority of respondents from the female and male groups... stated that poor Christian women are primarily only considered for sanitation work, whether at the domestic level or in any institution,” says Suleman.⁵⁸

As will be discussed in the findings from the data collection, minority women, predominantly Christian and Hindu women, are often perceived as immodest individuals whose sense of fashion is indecent and who have questionable characters. This phenomenon is explained by Laura Hamilton and her colleagues, who applied intersectionality to theorise the construction of “hegemonic femininities.” This hegemonic ideal reproduces and perpetuates the social domination of women and some men from the oppressed communities. This is a social location that privileged women occupy and from which they draw cultural ideals of womanhood that are raced, classed, and gendered at the same time. This position allows women to place themselves on a higher pedestal than those from minority backgrounds belonging to less privileged socio-

⁵⁶ The Marwari Community is an impoverished Hindu community in interior Sindh that speaks the Marwari language; their population is expected to be around a few thousand. People in this community have traditionally made their living by selling dried fruits.

⁵⁷ Maheshwary, “Poor Marginalised Hindu Women in Pakistan,” 34.

⁵⁸ Suleman, “A Case of Several Jeopardies,” 23.

economic and racial groups.⁵⁹ This phenomenon would be applicable in the Pakistani context where Muslim majority women embody the Pakistani cultural ideal of being pious and moral, supported by their privileged religious status. This hegemonic femininity is in stark opposition to other less privileged femininities, like minority women, and paints them as deviant, immoral subjects. This generates a typical perception of religious minority women in the broader public discourse and maintains their institutional domination rooted in the intersectionality of religion, class and gender.

Findings from the data collected

Findings from the FGDs and interviews reveal several interesting insights about stereotypes and expectations attached to minority women. Christian participants, for example, noted that they are often thought of as having dark skin and ugly faces. One Christian participant said that her class fellows think of all Christians as ugly. Whenever people from the Muslim community meet a Christian with fairer skin, they often start saying that “how can you be a Christian? You have such fair skin and a beautiful face”. Another Christian participant says that some of her Muslim colleagues believe that Muslims have fairer skin than Christians because they are superior. Another interesting observation made by a participant was that if a Muslim girl is wearing jeans, she is not judged, but if a Christian girl is wearing them, they say that Christian women have this get up because they are liberal about clothing and morals; hence, their character is often brought into question. On a similar account, a Christian participant observed that Christians are often thought to have a dark skin colour, wear westernised dresses, not cover their heads (observe purdah, which is considered indecent in most sections of the Pakistani society), chew chewing gums a lot, and wear much makeup. What is implied from all of this is that Christian girls are a little lewd and have questionable characters. On this account, an interviewee observed that physical features and their identification play a role in how minority women are perceived by people and, in turn, start perceiving themselves accordingly as well. Based on all of this, it can be concluded that Christian women have a typical image associated with them, that of being immoral and deviant. They are considered debased women who are inherently immoral and do not have a sound mind of their own and therefore, have to be guided and groomed.

Some stereotypical occupations are associated with Christian women, such as domestic work, beauty parlour work, nursing, and teaching. A well-informed participant elaborates that the perpetuation of this stereotype is attributed to a generational cycle of continuing to do the identical occupation prescribed by their families. The family circle and social networks are familiar and easy to mould oneself into by going into the same line of work.

Christian participants also state that they are often associated with the United States of America. Their Muslim acquaintances tell them they should not be worried because the US cares for them whenever there is a war. On the other hand, Hindu participants stated that they are often associated with India. For example, when Pakistan defeats India during cricket matches, people from the Muslim community tell them how they have defeated their people and vice versa. Another

⁵⁹ Laura T. Hamilton et al., “Hegemonic Femininities and Intersectional Domination,” *Sociological Theory* 37, no. 4 (December 1, 2019): 315–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275119888248>.

Hindu interviewee reported that when people hear her name, their first response is not to ask whether she is a Hindu but an Indian. People confuse nationality with religion and are surprised to learn that Pakistani Hindus live here.

The institution of patriarchy also acts to form oppressive expectations from Hindu women. A Hindu participant, for example, reported that girls in her community are often told that after their marriage, they should face their issues with their in-laws by themselves. Most girls do not dare to say to their parents about the abuses they may face at the hands of their in-laws, and they meet all these problems alone and live their lives in depression.

One interviewee from the Dalit background said that their women are not expected to participate in religious activities and discourse, especially the women from lower caste communities, and they are not even aware of their fundamental religious teachings. However, women from higher caste backgrounds are religiously literate and go to temples and maintain the social status that comes with it. It is interesting to note the intersectionality of caste and socio-economic status that determine women's religious involvement as prescribed by their culture, including their male counterparts and religious leaders. The Dalit women are told that they are not worthy to participate in religious activities on par with men. Intersectionality can be overtly observed as these women are at a disadvantage relative to their male counterparts and women from upper caste communities. Another Hindu participant observed that when a Hindu woman is widowed, her community and family mistreat her and expect her to live her remaining life in sorrow and repentance.

The social expectations attached to Sikh women are also discomfoting. A Sikh interviewee notes that Sikh girls are expected to get married early on, immediately after completing their secondary education, because of the fear that they might elope. Moreover, a negative stereotype that is often attached to the Sikh community and the Sikh women is that they are dim-witted and cheeky.

The social expectations attached to Ahmadi women are somewhat empowering. When asked about educational expectations, an Ahmadi interviewee replied that their girls are encouraged to study on equal footing with men. Like doctors, teachers, researchers, and engineers, all professions are encouraged. However, girls are told not to go into law because of how discriminatory and biased the legal system is against Ahmadis.

Theme 5: Experiences around depression, anxiety, and access to healthcare

Findings from the desk review

M.K. also finds specific barriers that prevent Ahmadi women's access to healthcare. Like all other women from impoverished backgrounds, the Ahmadi women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds also have trouble accessing healthcare due to their inability to afford it. At publicly run hospitals, the quality of healthcare is often inferior and "sometimes the medical staff

show their displeasure while treating people from Ahmadi backgrounds.”⁶⁰

Similarly, Suleman also finds instances of discrimination regarding Christian women. 58% of her respondents reported that if their faith was known, they were likely to experience some form of discrimination when receiving healthcare. The healthcare staff “may ignore them, or be unprofessional in doing their medical check-up,” and their behaviour may suddenly change when they realise that they treat a Christian. Jivan and Jacob’s study finds poverty as the only barrier to Hindu and Christian women’s access to healthcare.⁶¹

Findings from the data collected

Participants reported having anxiety and mental health issues after being bullied and the social boycott they faced in school due to their religious identity. An interviewee, for example, also cited anxiety as a significant aspect of Christian women’s everyday lives as a result of constant fear of saying or doing something in the public sphere that could be used against them, as in the case of blasphemous allegations.

Regarding access to healthcare, a respondent belonging to the Scheduled Caste community reported witnessing instances of Scheduled Caste women facing negligence and not getting medicines from the government facilities in interior Sindh. The reason for the discriminatory and prejudiced treatment was reported to be signalled by their attire, which portrayed their poor socioeconomic status. Another interviewee observed that access to healthcare is a matter of the availability of the facilities. It depends on where the health facilities are located, how conveniently accessible they are, and their quality. This access will significantly vary across geographic regions and socio-economic groups.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that the accessibility to female healthcare workers is a factor that was pointed out in this discussion. Minority women, especially those from vulnerable socio-economic groups, are not encouraged to get healthcare without a lady doctor.

Theme 6: Freedom of mobility and independence

Findings from the desk review

In the case of Hindu women, Seema Maheshwary finds cultural norms as the primary driver that restricts women’s mobility. Most men and women from the Hindu community believed that the restriction on women’s movement was for their protection. Maheshwary finds that many women are usually restricted to their homes’ boundary walls and often must be accompanied by male family members when they go out. The general social belief is that if a woman goes out alone, she might get harassed, and such a notion often supports the victim-blaming narrative.⁶² “Family

⁶⁰ K, “Gender-Based Perspectives on Key Issues Facing Poor Ahmadi Women in Pakistan,” 73.m

⁶¹ Jivan and Jacob, “Life on the Margins: A Study on the Minority Women in Pakistan,” 30–31.

⁶² Maheshwary, “Poor Marginalised Hindu Women in Pakistan,” 23.

members do not pay heed to the women's complaints about their experiences [of harassment], instead of instructing females to cover their heads to protect themselves," writes Maheshwary.

M.K. writes that Ahmadi women reported five issues when it comes to the use of public transport: "(1) anti-Ahmadiyya stickers in buses, trains, and rickshaws; (2) anti-Ahmadiyya stickers, banners, posters, and wall chalking at bus stations and railway stations; (3) fellow passengers not wishing to travel with them; (4) denial of services by drivers and conductors; and (5) they are not offered seats if they are in need." Apart from that, M.K. reports no other issues related to the mobility of Ahmadi women. However, cultural norms may likely play a specific role in restricting their mobility.⁶³ In the case of Christian or Sikh women, nothing in the literature explored their mobility and independence-related issues.

Findings from the data collected

Minority women, just like women from the majority community, face several social and cultural constraints that limit their mobility and independence. An Ahmadi interviewee said that although women in Ahmadi families have autonomy regarding occupation and career, parents are reluctant to send their daughters out of the city for education and job purposes due to increased persecution. Respondents belonging to the upper caste Hindu community and the Scheduled Caste Hindu community informed that girls have no independence regarding their education and career. Furthermore, many restrictions on their mobility are placed by parents because they are fearful that they might get harassed or kidnapped. A participant reported:

"Girls have this problem as well, that they aren't admitted, aren't allowed to do jobs, didn't let her go outside, and cannot let her go with a stranger. Because we're Hindus, we don't want any trouble. What if someone kidnaps her? What if something happens? Also, when you are in a place like this, you hear things like, "We didn't send her to this school/university because it was too far away, her father isn't free, and we happen to be Hindus. Can't trust any stranger to drop her off and pick her up." If trips are arranged, the parents usually don't allow their daughters to go for a stay. They say, "we know about your social circle, but where you'll go for a stay or with whom, we don't know about their mentality. If you go for a 3-day trip, what if, God forbid, something happens, because you're a Hindu?"

This is also evident in the case of Sikh girls, as a Sikh interviewee revealed that there are restrictions on girls visiting other people's homes and other cities for education. The main fear behind these restrictions is that they might elope with a Muslim man and convert to Islam. The respondents mentioned two recent instances, which reiterated that such a fear is justified and understandable.

⁶³ K, "Gender-Based Perspectives on Key Issues Facing Poor Ahmadi Women in Pakistan," 74–76.

Theme 7: How minority women engage in the public sphere

Findings from the desk review

One of the impediments widely shared by women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in Pakistan is the lack of NIC, which often prevents them from voting during elections. This lack of NICs is mainly due to negligence and bureaucratic hurdles and procedures, which are often difficult for minority women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to overcome. In the case of Ahmadi women, M.K. mainly discusses how it is often difficult for them to get passports or NICs because of the legal hurdles created for them specifically. K writes that “All Pakistani Muslim citizens applying for passports are obliged to sign a statement explicitly stating that they consider the founder of the Ahmadi community an ‘imposter’ and consider Ahmadis to be non-Muslims. The application for a national identity card requires a similar declaration. This legal requirement has forced every Ahmadi to state that they are non-Muslims.”⁶⁴ K also notes that Ahmadis cannot vote during elections because they are placed on a separate electoral list if they declare their faith in the government. Since Ahmadis consider themselves Muslims, they usually opt out of voting to avoid declaring themselves non-Muslims. Another reason why Ahmadis often do not officially report themselves as Ahmadis is because of the obstacles and persecution they face after being publicly identified.⁶⁵

Ayra Patras has mainly explored Christian women’s understanding of citizenship and relationship with the state in her thesis.⁶⁶ Patras finds that the religious nature of the Pakistani state often makes the minority women and their families feel inferior and second-rate citizens. In addition, Patras observes that the Christian sanitation workers “do not understand citizenship. Therefore, they are not engaged in political and social movements to claim civic rights entitled under the rubric of equal citizenship.” The author further notes how Christian women’s perceived discrimination also restricts their willingness to fully enjoy their rights under the constitution and laws.⁶⁷ Maheshwary similarly notes that Hindu women rarely engage with the national and local authorities and often prefer not to participate in politics.⁶⁸

Findings from the data collected

The in-depth interviews and FGDs revealed that minority women have limited participation in the political sphere. A Christian interviewee reported that Christian women are not interested in political involvement because they assume and expect not to find a voice. This idea is imbued in them that they cannot represent themselves, and any attempt to do so will be tough and not taken seriously. Similarly, a Dalit participant reported that Dalit women who do get elected to the public office sometimes conceal their background and do not own their Dalit identity. She gave the

⁶⁴ K, 62.

⁶⁵ K, 71.

⁶⁶ Patras, “Perspectives from the Margins: A Case of Christian Female Sweepers in Lahore,” 181.

⁶⁷ Patras, 182.

⁶⁸ Maheshwary, “Poor Marginalised Hindu Women in Pakistan,” 55–56.

example of Dalit woman Senator Krishna Kumari, who did not want to be identified as a "Scheduled Caste" Hindu. The participant says this is because of external pressure from other Hindu caste groups and the Scheduled Castes' reluctance not to be labelled as "Scheduled Castes" due to a sense of inferiority associated with the identity.

The situation of Hindu women when it comes to voting is incredibly discomfoting. One Hindu interviewee observed that Scheduled Caste men and women do not vote because they do not have identity cards and are not registered in the system. Hence, they have no awareness of political matters. Another Hindu interviewee says that women do cast votes, but according to the wishes of their feudal lords and husbands. They often have no idea whom they are voting for, and feudal lords use their vote to their advantage. "Usually, in villages, there are *waderas* [feudal lords] that keep the identity cards of all men and women with them. They load all these people into trucks and take them to the polling station to vote for the candidates preferred by the *waderas*. Most of these people are unaware of whom they are voting for. They only obey the command of the *wadera* in the village," said the participant.

However, participants from the Sikh and Ahmadi communities did not have much to say about women's voting and political engagement in their community. Ahmadis do not participate in elections or vote because they are often placed on a separate electoral list and must declare themselves as non-Muslims (a claim they contest). Sikhs, on the other hand, are too few in numbers, and the women from these communities seem to be too disempowered to participate in politics. One participant, for example, reported that it is difficult for Sikh women to cast votes because of a complete lack of support from their husbands and communities.

Theme 8: Impact of COVID-19 on minority women

Findings from the desk review

Nothing in the literature specifically explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women from minority backgrounds. Although, it is likely that with an increase in domestic violence worldwide, minority women in Pakistan must have also experienced increased instances of domestic violence.⁶⁹ Moreover, it is expected that the minority women's domestic violence experience would be exacerbated compared to women from the majority community due to the intersectionalities involved.

Findings from the data collected

Two interviewees from the Scheduled Caste communities reported that instances of domestic violence have increased for lower caste Hindu women. As sources of employment for socio-

⁶⁹ Rabia Ali and Asma Khalid, "COVID-19 and Domestic Violence in Pakistan: An Analysis of the Media Perspective," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 22, no. 12 (November 2021): 18.

economically vulnerable minority communities like the Scheduled Caste have been adversely affected, the men often let out their economic stress and frustration on the women at home.

“There has been a rise in domestic violence and fights at home. Recently, I read a survey that said that due to COVID, there had been a growth in the population. If a woman had three kids earlier, now she has five kids (laughs). I believe this is a dangerous situation because women have become more helpless than ever.”

Another interviewee from the Christian community said that many Christian women who work low-income jobs like domestic work, sanitation work, and nursing had been negatively affected by COVID-19, as their jobs have suffered. Employment opportunities and salaries have been lowered and have caused financial stress. Moreover, there is no proper healthcare system available for them, especially if they get infected with COVID-19.

“Under COVID, work opportunities have been lessened, but salaries have also been cut. And it is so much more dangerous to go out in public and work, which they (Christian women) must do because of survival.”

Theme 9: Their roles and status around their families and community

Findings from the desk review

Nothing in the literature was found that specifically explored the situation of minority women when it comes to their own families and communities.

Findings from the data collected

Their community's treatment of minority women was as problematic as the majority community. Moral policing by members of their community is widely prevalent. A Christian participant notes an adverse reaction from church elders and leaders whenever they go to the church without a scarf on their heads. Whenever the scarf falls off while praying, the elderly ladies in the church ask them to put the scarf back on their heads. The participants agree that this is a new trend and did not happen before. Similarly, a Sikh participant said that she once went to a Gurdwara in jeans and had an argument with the management; she specifically asked the administration where it was written in the religious texts that women could not go to Gurdwara in jeans, but she could not get an answer.

Another Christian participant notes instances of moral policing by her relatives and community members. She notes how her relatives keep track of when she goes out, in what clothes, and when she comes back; the relatives also try to convince the parents to impose restrictions on her.

Interviewees noted that Scheduled caste and Upper Caste Hindu girls do not get consulted regarding their marriage and have no say in whom they will marry. A Hindu participant also notes that women in their community face many restrictions after getting married. These restrictions include when and where they can or cannot go and whether they can commute alone or in the company of a male family member. The Hindu women are also asked not to do jobs or study and only take care of the household and children.

Hindu participants also talked about how girls are often treated differently than boys. There is less focus on their career success and education and more on their roles as housewives. The Christian participants also agreed that the practice was similar in the Christian community. It is interesting to note that although sons are preferred to get an education in hopes of a better socioeconomic future, girls are still expected to earn money and work on meagre daily wages in factories, where they face poor working conditions and are given lesser salaries than their male counterparts. In Hyderabad, Scheduled Caste Hindus girls who work in the garment or bangle-making factories settle for lower wages.

Caste-based social stratification is prevalent within the Hindu community. People from higher communities such as Vani, Lohana, Suhtar and Dewan are relatively better off. They run businesses and are part of the *jirga* (customary judicial committee of a village). These upper caste communities discriminate against and harass people from lower communities like Meghwar, Kohli, Bheel and Bagri. Interviewees reported discrimination by higher caste communities to lower caste communities, such as refusing to serve food or share utensils and subjecting them to humiliating punishments by the Jirga system. Another interviewee tells her experience of facing discrimination from Upper Caste Hindus while growing up. As she was the only Scheduled Caste child in her primary and secondary school, she often suffered exclusion and discriminatory attitudes. For example, her tuition teacher did not let her drink from the same glass as others and gave her water to drink in her palm. She became so accustomed to it that she did not even question these things as wrong when she was a child. Upper Caste Hindus scrutinised and commented on their dressing, diet, and way of speaking, which distinguished them from the Scheduled Caste.

Another Upper Caste Hindu participant recalled how her family and mother often treated people from the lower [Scheduled] castes. Since childhood, her mother and elders have often told her not to engage with lower caste Hindus and that on certain days in a week, she cannot even drink in the same glass as them. "So whenever someone from the Scheduled Caste visits their house, my mother stops them outside the house to talk to them," she says. The participant also notes that some upper caste Hindus think that marrying a Muslim is preferable to marrying someone from a lower caste background. If an Upper Caste girl marries a lower caste Hindu, she is banished by her family.

A Dalit participant also observed that one of the reasons behind the low progress of Dalit women in education and work is that high caste Hindus stop the Scheduled Caste Hindus from progressing by taking away the opportunities given to them, for example, in the form of government job quotas, etc.

Sikh women were often given in marriage at an early age. They were restricted from obtaining education or employment out of fear of elopement. This is a reasonably prevalent practice in the Sikh community, which often marginalises and disempowers them. Ahmadi women, however, report that they are often well-treated within their families, and it is acceptable for girls to complain and debate with their parents on matters of marriage and career.

Minority Women and Pakistan’s Progress on SDG No. 5

One of the United Nations (UN) flagship initiatives has been its development goals program. This program aimed to provide the development organisations, governments, and other multilateral organisations with a common framework and strategy under which they could align and coordinate their work towards social, economic and political development. The development goals program essentially provides development sectors and governments worldwide with targets that should be achieved by a given year. Such an effort is intended to guide the priorities of governments and development organisations and help them coordinate and efficiently allocate resources. Just like all other things in the international sphere, compliance with the development goals as set by the United Nations is entirely voluntary.

After the uneven progress on MDGs, the world leaders and development organisations again got together in September 2015 to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which consisted of a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with 169 targets that the development organisations hope to achieve in collaboration with the world leaders by 2030. The SDGs were formulated over three years through a participatory process involving UN members. The process began in 2012 with the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (also known as Rio+20). The SDGs proposal was first presented and adopted by the attending countries as a resolution titled “The Future We Want.” The SGD No. 5 aims to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.” To this end, the goal has established nine targets and 14 indicators to track the progress. The US has also assigned guardians to monitor and report progress on each indicator under this goal. The list of these targets and their respective indicators are as follows.

	SDG No.5 Targets	Indicators
1	5.1: “End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.”	5.1.1: “Whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex.”
2	5.2: “Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation.”	5.2.1: “Proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by form of violence and by age.” 5.2.2: “Proportion of women and girls aged 15 years

		and older subjected to sexual violence by persons other than an intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by age and place of occurrence”
3	5.3: “Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation.”	5.3.1: “Proportion of women aged 20-24 years who were married or in a union before age 15 and before age 18.” 5.3.2: “Proportion of girls and women aged 15-49 years who have undergone female genital mutilation/cutting, by age.
4	5.4: “Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate.”	”5.4.1: Proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, by sex, age and location
5	5.5: “Ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.”	5.5.1: “Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local governments.” 5.5.2: “Proportion of women in managerial positions”.
6	5.6: “Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.”	5.6.1: “Proportion of women aged 15-49 years who make their own informed decisions regarding sexual relations, contraceptive use and reproductive health care.” 5.6.2: “Number of countries with laws and regulations that guarantee women aged 15-49 years access to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education.”
7	5.a: “Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.”	5.a.1: “(a) Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex; and (b) share of women among owners or rights-bearers of agricultural land, by type of tenure.” 5.a.2: “Proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women’s equal rights to land ownership and/or control.”
8	5. b: “Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology, to promote the empowerment of women.”	5.b.1: “Proportion of individuals who own a mobile telephone, by sex.”
9	5.c: “Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all	5.c.1: “Proportion of countries with systems to track and make public allocations for gender equality and women’s empowerment.”

levels.”	
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One of the critical features of SDGs is the recognition of the interdependence between various goals and targets. It is impossible to achieve progress on “ending poverty in all its forms, everywhere” (SDG No. 1) without adequate strides in gender equality. Similarly, quality education, zero hunger, good health and well-being cannot be achieved unless acceptable progress is made towards gender equality. The UN Women’s 2018 report titled “Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” enlists and explains several SDGs that are strongly dependent on the satisfactory progress on SDG No. 5.⁷⁰ These interdependencies include but are not limited to the following:

- Research shows that women are better at managing resources and cash than men.⁷¹ Hence, their empowerment can drive the elimination of poverty and malnutrition and radically improve health and educational outcomes for children. Women bear a more significant burden of poverty than men, so any solution to end poverty must prioritise women over men in all cases.
- The issues related to women's health are a significant part of pathologies that are endemic to any developing country or region. Hence, gender equality in health, especially women’s access to health facilities, is critical to achieving a healthy population.
- UN Women notes that “women and girls play a central role in accessing, managing, and safeguarding household water and sanitation. Hence, addressing the water and sanitation needs of women benefits the health and well-being of entire communities.”
- Women’s access to decent work is essential to achieving equitable economic growth since they make up about half of any population.
- Empowering women and girls is a prerequisite of any effort to reduce inequalities (under SDG 10) since they make up about half of the population.

Several experts have also highlighted the importance of gender equality as critical to many economic development outcomes. Tessa Roseboom, for example, explains the vital role that women play in a child’s early development.⁷² When women are confronted with poverty, violence, mental health problems, and poor access to food, education and health facilities, it impairs children’s early development. Hence, women's empowerment is necessary for the success and prosperity of future generations. Roseboom also laments that the scientific community has failed to fully recognise and highlight the importance of gender equality in achieving the best possible outcomes for every child. She notes that children are much more likely to reach their full potential in a gender-equal society, improving future generations' health and well-being.

⁷⁰ UN Women, “Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (New York: UN Women, 2018).

⁷¹ “Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” (New York, NY: UN Women, 2018).

⁷² Tessa J. Roseboom, “Why Achieving Gender Equality Is of Fundamental Importance to Improve the Health and Well-Being of Future Generations: A DOHaD Perspective,” *Journal of Developmental Origins of Health and Disease* 11, no. 2 (April 2020): 101–4, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2040174419000734>.

Like Roseboom, many other scholars have also pointed to women's critical role in development. Several studies have empirically established the positive impact of gender diversity on organisational performance, especially women's role in improving organisational effectiveness.⁷³ Studies have also found that increasing women's labour force participation can drive global growth and prosperity.⁷⁴ Scholars have linked gender equality to the security and stability of a country. They have found that societies that exclude women from active participation in the public sphere have an increased risk of instability and violent conflict.⁷⁵

The comprehensiveness of SDGs is impressive when it comes to gender equality. However, the usefulness of having such comprehensive goals is questionable when there is little will on the ground in developing countries to own and achieve them. The data so far shows that the progress on MDG No. 3 was uneven and did not empower women, and one wonders why the case of SDG No. 5 would be any different. According to most statistics, gender parity was partially achieved at the primary education level in only five developing regions out of nine. These five were the Caucasus and Central Asia, Eastern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, South-Eastern Asia and Southern Asia (the most significant progress was in South Asia).

Overall, only 64% of countries in the developing region have achieved gender parity in primary education.⁷⁶ This partial progress in achieving gender parity in primary education did not impact other related indicators. An interesting thing to note is that according to the UN, the worldwide share of women in non-agricultural wage employment has only increased from 35% in 1990 to 41% in 2015. On the other hand, the ILO data shows that the global female labour force participation rate has declined from 51.3% in 1998 to 48.5% in 2018.⁷⁷

In Pakistan, the Ministry of Planning, Development, and Special Initiatives is allocated to implement and further progress on SDGs. The ministry had postulated a national framework of SDG implementation, which entailed detailed identification and structural planning and development. However, there were no efforts to advance and track actions regarding the implementation of SDG No.5. The 2019 report on SDGs by the Ministry of Planning, Development, and Special Initiatives did not include any mention of the progress on the targets and indicators of SDG No. 5. In short, there is a complete absence of any data through which Pakistan's progress on SDG No. 5 can be tracked in a meaningful way, especially for minority women.

⁷³ Sunmin An and Soo-Young Lee, "The Impact of Gender Diversity and Disparity on Organizational Performance: Evidence from Korean Local Government-Owned Enterprises," *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, January 29, 2021, 0734371X21990718, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0734371X21990718>.

⁷⁴ Douglas L. Peterson and Tara Powers, "Women as Drivers of Economic Growth," S&P Global, September 1, 2019, <https://www.spglobal.com/en/research-insights/featured/women-as-drivers-of-economic-growth>.

⁷⁵ Catalina Crespo-Sancho, "Can Gender Equality Prevent Violent Conflict?," World Bank blogs, March 28, 2018, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/dev4peace/can-gender-equality-prevent-violent-conflict>.

⁷⁶ Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015*, Millennium Development Goals Report (New York: United Nations, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.18356/6cd11401-en>.

⁷⁷ Sher Verick, "Female Labor Force Participation and Development," IZA World of Labor, December 18, 2018, <https://wol.iza.org/articles/female-labor-force-participation-and-development/long#:~:text=Over%20the%20last%20two%20decades,ilo.org%2Filoostat>).

Minority Women and Implementation of CEDAW in Pakistan

Convention of Elimination of all forms of violence against women (CEDAW) is a convention formulated and adopted by the UN general assembly in 1979 to eliminate various forms of discrimination carried out based on sex. It came into force on 3rd September 1981, after all the involved state parties signed it.⁷⁸ The Government of Pakistan is a state party signatory to the CEDAW committee. There have been efforts to inculcate CEDAW goals in the national legislature. But no legislative recognition or affirmative action has been taken that aligns the CEDAW agreement with the rights and protection of women belonging to religious minority groups in Pakistan.⁷⁹

The intersectionality of gender with caste has been highlighted in the general recommendations by the CEDAW committee. Despite being a state party in both the CEDAW and the Convention on eliminating all forms of racial discrimination (CERD), Pakistan has taken no specific measures to ensure the protection and equality of women belonging to religious minorities. The constitution of Pakistan also includes articles in alignment with CEDAW that guarantee social and economic rights to everyone irrespective of sex, caste, creed, and race. Despite being a signatory party to CEDAW and having such articles in the constitution, no effort has been made by the Government of Pakistan to understand and combat the specific issues of religious minority women. Reports to the CEDAW committee state that there is an increased political and public participation of women in Pakistan. But there hasn't been any introduction of such measures intended for women from religious minorities, including the most stigmatised scheduled caste Hindus.

Scheduled caste Hindus, also known as Dalits, are among the religious minorities that face the most discrimination. Poor socioeconomic conditions, low education levels, harsh and exploitative working environments, residence in under-developed rural areas, and poor access to healthcare constitute the issues faced by Dalits. Dalit women are at a disadvantage regarding equal access to opportunities on the grounds of both caste and gender.⁸⁰ Consequently, policy recommendations suggest that a concrete and measurable plan is required, inclusive of the context of religion, socioeconomic class, and gender. Underdeveloped geographic settlements, poverty, bonded and debt labour, and unobtainable healthcare facilities are rampant among Scheduled Caste Hindus. Government reports and research have shown that women who live in and face such poor conditions are less likely to receive good quality education and healthcare, equal opportunities for employment and socio-economic progress, and justice for gender-based

⁷⁸ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, "Short History of CEDAW Convention," accessed January 30, 2022, <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/history.htm>.

⁷⁹ Center for Social Justice, "Discrimination Lingers on... A Shadow Report on the Issues Faced by Minority Women" (Lahore: Center for Social Justice, February 2020), <http://www.csjpak.org/pdf/CEDAW%20Shadow%20Report.2020.pdf>.

⁸⁰ PDSN & IDSN, "Scheduled Caste Women in Pakistan - Denied a Life in Dignity and Respect" (Delhi & New York: Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network and International Dalit Solidarity Network, January 2013), https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CEDAW/Shared%20Documents/PAK/INT_CEDAW_NGO_PAK_13278_E.pdf.

violence. Moreover, the widespread discrimination faced by a religious minority group obscures the specific oppressive experiences of the women in that group. For example, the experiences of religious minorities, specifically scheduled caste Hindus, involved in bonded labour and exploitative working environments are perceived as a whole unit, sidelining the additional layer of vulnerability and oppression the women are subjected to, such as rape and violence.

The CEDAW convention ensures no discrimination in education, employment, and political participation based on gender and caste. Women from religious minorities are more likely to be overlooked in the policy measures and implementation. A multi-layered effort is required on the part of administrative bodies to mitigate the effects of discrimination directed towards women from religious minority groups on an institutional level. Measures and strategies that combine consideration of caste, religion, and gender are needed to improve the socio-economic and living conditions of women belonging to scheduled caste and other religious minorities.

Accurate and hard data gathered on minority women should be collected to properly plan and implement anti-discriminatory laws. There is a shortage of government research on the socio-demographics and issues of religious minorities. It is recommended that disaggregated data on women from various religious minority backgrounds be collected and analysed. Data on educational status, healthcare access, instances of violence, and harassment regarding minority women is needed to generate and implement relevant policies effectively.

Policy Recommendation

Based on the results of the study, several possible policy recommendations were identified, which are as follows:

1. Pakistan needs to address issues of minority women. Considering them just like Muslim women does not help them. The policies related to women should separately consider their issues.
2. School textbooks should highlight the culture of minorities and show how their women dress differently so that they are not ostracised and considered foreigners.
3. A nationwide campaign in remote and rural places should be launched to address discrimination faced by minority women.
4. Harassment policies should include sections on minority women to address their challenges. The guidelines should include how minority women fear being accused of religious accusations and remain silent.
5. The government needs to provide minority women safety in their family laws. For example, they are allowed to divorce if they wish so. They should also be provided financial security during marriage and if divorced.
6. Incidents of forced conversion and marriage require an empathetic view of the state rather than a defensive approach currently adopted by the government.
7. Women's development schemes should separately consider minority women because their socioeconomic status often plays a critical role in discriminatory treatment.

8. The government needs to carefully review its policies and analyse why religious minorities are otherised and associated with foreign nations.
9. Several independent studies on Pakistani educational textbooks confirm that religions other than Islam are vilified. This policy needs to be revisited because minority men and women are considered immoral, indecent and corrupt because of this indoctrination.
10. The government also needs to diversify occupations for religious minorities, and this should be achieved by maximising the benefits of job and education quotas for religious minorities.
11. Financial assistance programs like Ehsaas should separately run programs for minority women not to be overlooked in the safety net programs.
12. All the SDGs related plans must give special attention to religious minorities and their women so that no one is left behind.

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