

Despised and Disgraced: Christian Women in Pakistan Face Unique Persecution

Christian women in Pakistan are among the country's poorest and most hated citizens because they are both the "wrong" religion and the "wrong" gender. Abductions, forced conversions, forced marriages and rapes are just some of the horrors Christian women in Pakistan uniquely face. Living on one of the lowest rungs of society, the futures of many Christian women are destroyed by the heinous acts of violence visited upon them because of their faith.

On May 4, Zoya Mary's life was radically changed when Muslim radicals armed with guns and grenades broke down the door of her family's home. Led by Zoya's own uncle, the group of radicals abducted Zoya from her home and held her captive for 12 days.

Months earlier, Zoya's uncle, no longer able to deal with the stigma that is associated with being a religious minority, converted to Islam. Unfortunately, the imam he converted under was a radical. As part of conversion to Islam, Zoya's uncle was pressured by his imam to kidnap Zoya and forcefully convert her and her family to Islam as well.

With Zoya in their custody, her uncle and his radical counterparts began calling Zoya's family, threatening to kill Zoya unless the entire family converted to Islam. During her 12 days of captivity, Zoya was raped by her captors, forcefully married to a Muslim man as a second wife and forcefully converted to Islam.

Due to stress and a heart condition Zoya was born with, she suffered a major heart attack. In the ultimate display of disregard for Zoya's humanity, her captors dumped her on the

side of the road where she was discovered by passersby who then took her to a hospital. After recovering from her heart attack, Zoya was able to reunite with her family.

Unfortunately, this was not the end of Zoya's ordeal. After returning home from the hospital, Zoya and her family were contacted by Ali Muhammad, her "Muslim husband," who was demanding his wife be returned. Since then, this man has initiated a court case against Zoya's father for kidnapping his wife.

One of the most tragic details of this story is Zoya's age. She is only 14 years old and has already suffered so much. Under Pakistani law, no one can be married or change their religion until they are the age of 18. Individuals can get married younger with the consent of their parents, but in Zoya's case, she was forced by her kidnappers to sign false documents, all of which stated she was 18, consenting to her marriage and conversion to Islam.

To date, Zoya and her family continue to fight Ali in court. Zoya's father has extensive documentation regarding her age, thus proving both the marriage and conversion illegal. Outside the court, Ali has approached Zoya's family and offered them bribes to concede in the court case. This sick proposition was quickly rejected by Zoya's father.

When the offer of bribes did not succeed, Ali began to threaten Zoya's family, saying that if they did not concede the court case the family would be attacked again. Despite these threats, Zoya's father has stood steadfast in his protection for his daughter.

Unfortunately, attacks against Christian women and girls like the attack on Zoya are not uncommon in Pakistan. Amelia, another Christian woman, told a story similar to Zoya's.

Earlier this year, Amelia was walking home from work when she passed the house of Zeeshan, a Muslim boy who found her

attractive. After his initial advances were spurned, Zeeshan became enraged. Being rejected by a Christian woman was—in Zeeshan's mind—unacceptable. Days later, Zeeshan and another Muslim man ambushed Amelia, knocking her unconscious and holding her captive in an abandoned house.

When Amelia awoke from her concussion, she discovered that she had been tied up and stripped naked. For the next three days, Zeeshan and his accomplice raped Amelia repeatedly. On the third day, while Amelia was unrestrained, she noticed that the door of the abandoned house was left slightly open. Seizing the opportunity, Amelia rushed to the door and ran out into the streets crying for help.

After visiting the hospital and receiving much-needed medical treatment, Amelia filed a report with the police against her attackers. After her initial interview with the police, an officer advised her against bringing any legal action against Zeeshan. The officer went on to say her best course of action would be to convert to Islam and marry her rapist.

Disgusted, Amelia rejected the police officer's advice and continues to engage in a court battle seeking justice. Because of this pursuit of justice, Amelia has received threatening phone calls from Zeeshan and his family members attempting to dissuade her from pursuing the case any further.

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