

Hundreds of Christian Women Abducted, Forced to Embrace Islam Each Year

A Pakistani Muslim nongovernmental organization says that every year between 100 to 700 Christian women, “usually between the ages of 12 and 25 are abducted, converted to Islam, and married to the abductor or third party.”

In its investigative report “Forced Marriages & Forced Conversions in the Christian Community of Pakistan” the Movement for Solidarity and Peace (MSP), identifies a pattern. It says that in most of these abduction cases the parents of Christian victims file a police report, but in response the abductor’s relatives or friends file another police complaint on behalf of the abducted Christian woman, claiming that she willfully married and converted to Islam, and that her parents are now “harassing” her unlawfully.

Of Pakistan’s approximate 185 million population, about 95 percent are Muslims—20-30 percent Shia, the majority Sunni. Christians account for about 2 percent of the total population and about the same number are Hindus. The last 1 percent are of other religious minorities.

The MSP represents the Hazara community, a distinct Turkic ethnic group from the areas bordering Afghanistan (in which country they make up 13 percent of the population). They belong to the Shiite branch of Islam and are treated with suspicion.

In Pakistan, Hazaras have lost thousands of their people in the last two decades in sectarian killings. Being itself subjected to violence and discrimination, the MSP confirms similar treatment meted out to Christians.

The report notes that after abduction, these Christian women are subjected to “sexual violence, rape, forced prostitution, human trafficking and sale, or other domestic abuse” so when produced before the court and asked to testify if they were abducted, these women (and sometimes children) give a statement in favor of their captors for fear of threats to their life, and those of their family.

MSP says the report is based on field research compiled by legal expert Emad Ansari during the summer of 2012; it includes numerous interviews with local CSOs, national policymakers and diverse stakeholders from amongst the Pakistani judiciary.

Backing up MSP’s research, the respected national Pakistani daily paper ‘Dawn’ has also presented an investigation of such an incident: a Hindu girl whose parents filed a police complaint about her forced conversion. Hindus also suffer abduction of their women and forcible conversion to Islam. The investigation shows that it is quite difficult to actually say whether the marriage was contracted with complete willful consent.

Similarly, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2014 report also alludes to forced conversion of Christian women in Pakistan and notes abduction of a 14-year-old Christian who was forcibly converted to Islam and then given in marriage to her captor.

This USCIRF report notes that Pakistani Christians are a struggling and socio-economically marginalized group, of which about 80 per cent lead life in abject poverty. Because of their small number and poor status they “are subjected to human trafficking and sale through debt transfers, physical abuse, and economic exploitation.” In this situation, the exploitation of Christian women is much easier and the crimes go unpunished with impunity.

The report does not rule out willful conversions due to socio-economic reasons. "Social and economic disparities and poverty remain a major reason for willful conversions from Christianity to Islam" the report says. It notes the role of social pressure for upward mobility by 'conversion'.

The National Commission for Justice and Peace, a Catholic organization working in Pakistan, recorded 624 media reports of Christians' conversion to Islam between the years 2000 and 2012. The MSP comments that, from these media reports, it is difficult to find out how many conversions were of a coercive nature.

However, it notes that "The line between willful and coerced conversions becomes further blurred when the reasons for conversion include a need for security, escape from discrimination, or fear of future violence". (Life can clearly appear to be easier for women who marry 'above their station' through conversion). However, the MSP report stresses that "coercive evangelization and targeted conversions are taking place".

Talking to World Watch Monitor, Albert David, the chairman of the Pakistan United Christian Movement, stressed that the government should take measures to stop forced conversion. He also appealed to the chief justice of Pakistan to take action if the government fails to introduce special measures.