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Bridging Pakistan's Gender Divide

By Samina Ahmed

International Crisis Group (07.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2heaFWY> - "Our people won't let a girl study beyond the third grade (eight or nine years old). But this girl here cries and says: 'I want to learn'. And I love her so much that I have no choice but to send her away from our village, because no education is available here beyond primary school level. She will go to the big city and she will learn and be the first one in the family".

I hear these words from a Pakistani father about his daughter back in the early 2000s, on my second research assignment for the International Crisis Group. I am travelling in Balochistan, an area affected by a decade-old insurgency. I am seeking to unpack the causes of militancy and conflict through meetings with former militants, political workers, rights activists and religious leaders.

The eagerness of a little girl to defy the odds against her studying still resonates for me, as does her father's sympathetic support, despite all the obstacles of tradition. They epitomise countless testimonies I hear throughout my travels. Not only do they influence how I work, but they guide my understanding of Pakistan and of how people – especially but not only women and children – experience its violence and multiple conflicts.

Unheard Voices, Invisible Forces

On this pivotal day for me in Balochistan, a region tucked up against Iran and Afghanistan, I am planning to meet liberal, secular political activists, opponents of the Islamist Taliban. The meeting at this house, sitting cross-legged on the floor are only men, with one exception: a little girl. Responding to my questions, her father explains her determination to go to school and praises her character and tenacity to fulfil her dream.

He then proposes that I speak to other women from their community to hear their perspectives and experiences of the situation in the province. Such an opportunity in a part of the country where men and women live segregated lives is rare for any outsider. I jump at the chance and am escorted to the part of the house where women of the family live, off-limits to all men barring close relatives.

A large group of women greet me, well-dressed for the occasion. They gather round, excited at the chance to meet an outsider. They start by asking questions. How can a woman do the job I do? How can I work alone? How do I travel long distances freely? Except for family visits once a year, they say, they never venture beyond the walls of their home. They begin sharing their experiences and life stories. Some tell me that they would like to be educated and to have a job. There is anger and frustration in their voices. They know what they want, but believe it beyond their reach.

This meeting has a profound effect on me. I am a longstanding women's rights activist, and was a member of the Women's Action Forum in the 1980s during military rule. Having studied in universities in Pakistan and abroad, and worked in several countries, I am comfortable standing up for myself in a man's world. But experiencing real, well-articulated frustration on both male and female sides of a traditional Pashtun household makes me start to think anew about the gender divide.

I begin to understand the importance of integrating gender power dynamics into my conflict analysis by listening to women and girls in conflict-affected areas, even if they are publicly invisible. I come to realise that being a female researcher is a definite plus, as it gives me access to women as well as men. That day I make a conscious choice: I will redouble efforts to interview women as well as men, understand how they experience violence and their perspective on ending it and harness their potential to help build a more peaceful society.

The Remotest Reaches of Pakistan

In my years at Crisis Group I travel throughout Pakistan, from the slums of its largest city, Karachi, on the Indian Ocean to the hamlets of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa along the border with Afghanistan. I talk to people of all walks of life, especially the unheard and invisible parts of society. These include not just the voices of girls and women, but also those of political party workers, fishermen and farmers struggling for survival in often harsh and inhospitable terrain.

As a female researcher, I face no resistance while at work. The challenges are those faced by every woman travelling in Pakistan. The absence of public toilets for women, for example, poses not just a health but also a security hazard. Overall, though, during my trips, including times when I am the only woman staying in hole-in-the-wall hotels, I find that people are especially anxious to ensure that I am comfortable and safe.

Being a professional, at times people forget that I am a woman. They rarely treat me as an outsider, or a woman not conforming to local norms. The exception is in urban centres where I visit more conservative madrasas or mosques, though even there, people do not stop or openly rebuke me. Only very occasionally does someone ask me to cover my hair, as normally expected of a Muslim woman in Pakistan. Through their demeanour, however, people can convey that they are at least uncomfortable if not hostile to independent women like myself.

Of course I am conscious that not all Pakistani women think like me. This strikes me most forcefully one day on a visit to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. I attend a session of the local parliament, where the ruling Islamist Party has a large number of female parliamentarians. Yet it is the men who talk, while the women simply sit there in silence.

"Aren't you going to take part in the debate?", I ask one of the women from the Islamist Party.

"No, my male leaders will talk on my behalf", she retorts.

Providing a public platform to women is sometimes not enough to ensure that they themselves express their views and needs. In some cases, women in public life may also serve as proxies for other interests.

And yet I also see women and girls, like that little girl in the remote household in Balochistan, who want to speak out, who want to learn, who want an education, and whose menfolk are sometimes willing to listen to them.

The Madrasa Paradox

Women are not the whole story, since men are also changing, sometimes almost without being aware of it. I become conscious of this during my research on madrasas, or religious schools, a truly male preserve that I initially do not even connect to women.

I cannot enter madrasas, so a male Crisis Group colleague must talk to male students there. But I can meet the leaders of the religious parties that run much of the madrasa sector. I approach one Islamist party leader, who runs what is possibly the largest and most extreme group of madrasas, where almost nothing except the strictest interpretation of the Quran is taught. Surprisingly, he invites me to his home. Clearly, he doesn't consider me as a threat as a woman. His young son is even present.

"Well sister", the party leader says, "please tell my son he should study hard".

"*Maulana*, what does the young boy study?" I ask.

"English, mathematics and computer sciences".

"But *Maulana*", I shoot back. "Why isn't he in your madrasa?".

And he replies: "Sister, times have changed".

Giving Women a Chance

In 2005, I travel to Swat in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to get a sense of what is happening in the countryside. A guide, who is an ex-fighter wounded on battlefronts in both Afghanistan and in Kashmir, invites me home to meet his family. His house lies in a small, beautiful mountain village where he lives with his young daughters. His biggest problem: the obstacles he faces in giving these girls a formal education.

"You know", he says, "for me the most precious thing now is their lives. And their futures. But what do I have to offer them? There is no school here. Without that, they can't be ever like you, educated. And that's what I want".

Then the girls cluster round and I speak with them about what they believe the village most urgently needs. Their answer is simple: water, because they have to travel long distances just to get enough water for the house. And education. Through the years, I often hear this refrain.

Schooling comes up again when I try to explain Crisis Group's conflict prevention work to one fifteen-year-old girl in Balochistan's Gwadar city, a major naval base and now the hub of the Pakistan-China Economic Corridor. She responds with frustration and anger.

"You know, we are sick of the UN and you NGOs. You come here, you talk, you preach, you write, over and over again, but you don't do anything for us".

"What you think needs to be done?", I ask.

"Look, I don't want to be a teacher. I want to be a scientist. But in my school, there is not even a science teacher!", she says. "I will never be a scientist unless we have what you had, the privilege of a good education".

I learn my lesson right there. I want to do something about the lack of opportunities offered to her. Pakistani society may seem conservative about women's education, but under the surface, currents for change are building momentum.

My research across Pakistan illustrates the impact that insecurity has on girls' ability to seek an education. Every person interviewed – not just young girls, but also their fathers and brothers – said that if their daughters or sisters could travel without risk to a nearby school, they would send them there. In much of the countryside, however, people often live far from schools; in rough urban districts, the daily trip to school may pose a physical threat. "We can't risk them going long distances. It's too unsafe", is a complaint I hear often. It challenges my previous notion that cultural and social restrictions alone prevent girls from accessing education in Pakistan's conflict zones.

These insights lead me to write two reports on girls' education in Pakistan. The first one, *Pakistan: Reforming the Education Sector*, published in October 2004, warns that Pakistan's deteriorating education system and a curriculum that promotes religious intolerance fails to equip young people with the skills necessary for a modern economy, and, in some cases, creates foot soldiers for jihadist groups.

I return to the subject ten years later, publishing *Education Reform in Pakistan* to show that millions are still out of school, the curriculum remains unreformed, and the education system remains alarmingly impoverished. That report also raises the problem of safe access to schools for girls, as well as the need to change the curriculum to protect against religious extremism and sectarianism.

A Mutual Interdependence

I am humbled again and again by human rights activists, humanitarian aid workers, and women's rights leaders across Pakistan who risk their lives to promote positive changes in the country. By interviewing them and writing about their views, I take their voices to senior decision-makers in Pakistan. A leading champion of women's rights, Pakistan's first woman Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, lauding the recommendations of our reports, told her party leaders that they should be essential reading. Unlike me, though, many of the people I interview are physically threatened and attacked. Yet every time I meet them, they thank me. I always feel it should be the other way around.

The interdependence of my work and theirs is driven home to me one day in Punjab. I meet a lawyer who says he distributes photocopied versions of our reports among the members of his bar council to build consciousness of the legal changes Pakistan needs, especially to open new opportunities for women. I voice my surprise when he adds that he buys the reports ready-bound in a bookshop, even though they are available for free on our website. He sums up the relationship between Crisis Group, with our research and policy advocacy, and dedicated activists. His group is ready to distribute our work this way because, he says: "We have learned as much from these reports as you have learned from us".

In 2016, writing about different layers of criminal, jihadist and ethno-religious violence in Karachi, I take my insights on what is holding schoolgirls back and test how they may apply to society more broadly. I look into gender-based violence where women are regularly subjected to sexual harassment on the streets as they go to work. Like girls trying to gain a formal education, I find that women from poor and marginalised communities in this mega-city, Pakistan's economic hub, have few options to travel safely to their place of work. What women fear most is violence as they travel from their homes to earn a living and support their families.

By incorporating the perspectives of women and girls into my research, amplifying their voices and analysing how they experience the violence endemic to parts of Pakistan, Crisis Group's work aims to provide a richer understanding of violence and conflict in my home country and encourage the government to take meaningful steps to address the simple problem of safety. Every woman who can leave her house each day to school or work represents a step forward.

International Women's Day: Pakistan's 'invisible' female workers celebrate new legal status

Home-based workers in Sindh province, who prop up the country's informal economy, hope their historic victory will mean an end to exploitation.

By Zofeen Ebrahim

The Guardian (08.03.2017) - Zehra Khan has much to celebrate on International Women's Day. It is exactly four months since members of the Home-Based Women Workers Federation (HBWWF) in Sindh province, Pakistan – of which Khan is secretary general – finally received legal recognition.

The province's chief minister, Syed Murad Ali Shah, signed a policy that means the region's estimated 5 million home-based workers – the majority of whom are women – can register as workers and access benefits.

"It was an important day not only for the history of the labour movement in Sindh and Pakistan, but also for south Asia," says Khan, whose federation has more than 4,500 members.

"Once they are legally accepted as workers, they can be registered with the government-run social security institution, [and] be part of [the] workers' welfare board to enjoy benefits like health, education and housing, as well as those offered after retirement," she adds.

Almost 80% of an estimated 12 million Pakistani home-based workers are women. As well as unpaid domestic work, the women often spend up to 10 hours a day making garments, footwear, sports goods, and arts and crafts behind closed doors. Their work is often invisible to the rest of the world, despite having propped up the country's informal economy for so long.

"They are left to negotiate with the middlemen. Many often get deprived of payment or chastised if they demand better wages," says Khan.

The new government policy, however, brings hope that this kind of exploitation will soon come to an end. Once registered as workers, the women will be able to demand a basic level of pay as set out in the Minimum Wages Act of 2015.

Khan and the federation have been lobbying to improve the rights of female workers for years.

The HBWWF, part-funded by the international women's fund Mama Cash, was born out of informal meetings with female home-based workers organised by Khan back in 2001. By 2005, the small group had grown into the federation, empowering women to recognise their valuable contribution to society and the importance of collective bargaining.

The women put pressure on the local government to improve local services, such as fixing the sewage system and having the rubbish collected from their narrow alleys. They asked the water board for a water supply, and demanded that domestic violence be addressed.

Eventually, they began to focus on their own rights as workers and lobbying for the new nationwide policy began.

"We carried out extensive consultations with other labour and trade unions within Pakistan," recalls Khan.

Most of the time was spent sitting in the offices of the parliamentarians and politicians, cajoling them to give a few minutes of their time to read through their policy and understand what they were saying.

"We would wait with bated breath and a sinking feeling as our file got buried under the hundreds of others that needed the chief minister's immediate attention," says Khan.

After the passage of the 18th constitutional amendment in 2010, when provinces were given greater autonomy, Sindh formed a provincial taskforce in 2013 to tweak the national policy and make it more province-specific, and sent it to the chief executive for approval.

"It's neither gender- nor women-focused – our focus is class, and should be seen through the lens of a labour movement," says Khan.

The government of Sindh has indeed taken a historic first step among the four provinces of Pakistan, bringing home-based workers into the legal net.

Pakistan toughens laws on rape and 'honor killings' of women

By Salman Masood

NY Times (06.10.2016) - <http://nyti.ms/2dJzqIS> - The Pakistani Parliament on Thursday passed laws to increase sentences for rapists and those who commit so-called honor killings of women, and closed a loophole that allowed many of the killers to go free, after hours of heated opposition from Islamist lawmakers.

Each year, hundreds of Pakistani women are killed by relatives angered by behavior they believe has impugned the family's reputation, according to human rights activists, who have campaigned against the practice and called for tougher laws for years.

Most of those killings have gone without punishment because of a tenet of Islamic law that allows killers to go free if they are forgiven by the woman's family — something that usually happens because the killers are usually family members.

“Under the new law, relatives of the victim would only be able to pardon the killer if he is sentenced to capital punishment,” Zahid Hamid, the law minister, said on the floor of the National Assembly. “However, the culprit would still face a mandatory life sentence.”

The Parliament was divided in a debate that lasted hours, with particular opposition from Islamist political parties that insisted the bill must be approved by a clerical panel before being passed. That requirement has been a sticking point in past attempts to enact legal protections for women.

This time, the government and supporters of the bill from the opposition benches ruled that step out.

In the other legislation passed on Thursday, Mr. Hamid, the law minister, said that verdicts in rape cases would have to be given within three months, and that sentences would increase.

“We have made it mandatory that the culprit must be imprisoned for 25 years,” he said, adding that the rape of minors and the mentally and physically disabled has also become punishable under the law.

“These bills are hugely important for Pakistani women, where rape conviction rates were almost nonexistent, due in large part to various technical obstacles to accessing justice,” Yasmeen Hassan, the global executive director of the rights group Equality Now, said in a statement. “We hope that these new laws will help generate a cultural shift in Pakistani society and that women will be able to live their lives in safety.”

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif hailed the passage of the legislation, saying that there was “no honor in honor killings.”

“I congratulate the Parliament, the NGOs, civil society, academia, media and all those who worked hard and supported us in the passage of this legislation,” Mr. Sharif said, referring to nongovernmental organizations.

He said his government would ensure enforcement of the legislation.

“I feel so relieved,” said Sughra Imam, a former senator, who had originally pushed for legislation against the honor-killing practice. “I hope they will help,” Ms. Imam said in an interview, referring to the new laws.

“No law will completely eliminate crime,” she said. “But at the very least, it should hold those who violate the law and principles of justice to account.”

Pakistan passes marriage bill protecting Hindu women’s rights

The Malay Mail Online (27.09.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2d2XvuG> - Pakistan’s lower house of parliament has passed a landmark bill giving its small Hindu minority the right to register marriages, the last major hurdle on the way to enacting a law aimed at protecting women’s rights.

Activists say that Hindu women have been disproportionately targeted for abduction, forced conversions and rape because their marriages were never officially recognised and therefore not provable in court.

The National Assembly passed the bill yesterday after 10 months of deliberation. The Senate is expected to pass the law without any significant delay.

Hindus make up approximately 1.6 per cent of Pakistan's Moslem-majority 190 million population, but have not had any legal mechanisms to register their marriages since independence from Britain in 1947.

Christians, the other main religious minority, have a British law dating back to 1870 regulating their marriages.

The new bill sets the minimum age for marriage for Hindus at 18. The minimum legal age for marriage for citizens of other religions is 18 for men and 16 for women.

Breaking the law regarding the minimum age would result in six months' jail and a 5,000-rupee (RM194) fine. Unicef estimates 21 per cent of women aged 20 to 24 in Pakistan were first married before age 18, with 3 per cent married before age 16.

Zohra Yusuf, head of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, said the proof of marriage would offer greater protection to Hindu women.

"Once marriages are registered, at least they have certain rights that are ensured," she said.

Widows, in particular, were disadvantaged, she said, being unable to prove marriage to their husbands in order to gain government welfare benefits. The new law legalises remarriage for a widow six months after her husband's death.

It also grants Hindus the right to divorce, with women having the additional right to do so on grounds of negligence, bigamy or having been married before 18.

Activists warn, however, that more needs to be done on the issue of abductions and forced conversions.

"When there is suspicion of a forced marriage, it has to be investigated ... currently members of the Hindu community say that no-one listens to them, not even the courts," said Yusuf.

Who are the Pakistani group proposing to 'lightly beat' women?

A Pakistani group has come under fire for drafting a women's protection bill that suggests a husband can "lightly beat" his wife to keep her in line. What is this body and does it have any real power? The BBC's M Ilyas Khan explains.

BBC (30.05.2016) - <http://bbc.in/1XKuEvt> -

It is called the Council of Islamic Ideology

Created by a military government in 1961, the Council of Islamic ideology (CII) is a 20-member constitutional body that advises the government on religious aspects of the law and society - but its recommendations are not binding.

The constitution says CII members should be "well-qualified". It specifies that the council should have at least two retired judges, four members with a minimum of 15 years of

experience in Islamic research and teaching, and that members should have an "understanding of the economic, political, legal or administrative problems of Pakistan".

In practice though, this definition has been stretched to include men from religious pressure groups whose careers have been limited to administering or teaching in religious seminaries where contemporary knowledge is looked down upon.

So many of the CII's proposals have not been taken seriously by leaders.

The proposal to 'lightly beat' women

No stranger to controversy, the CII has faced unprecedented criticism as a result of the draft women's protection bill.

Portions of the draft leaked to the media recommend a husband should be allowed to "lightly" beat his wife if, among other things, she refuses to dress properly or turns down overtures for sexual intercourse.

It also prohibits female nurses from taking care of male patients, and bans the presence of women in receptions held for visiting foreign dignitaries.

Punjab Law Minister Rana Sanaullah rejected the proposals, saying: "Islam does not allow any violence, whether against women or children."

Lawyer and human rights activist Asma Jahangir told Geo TV that the proposals amounted to "the humiliation of women".

The independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan termed the proposals "ridiculous", and recommended the abolition of the CII.

So why did they come up with the recommendations?

The CII proposals were a response to a women's protection law passed by the Punjab government in March.

That law wanted to make it easier for female victims of domestic violence to report abuse, and introduced procedures to keep the perpetrator away from the victim until the dispute was resolved.

The CII was opposed to the law, and declared it un-Islamic.

The Punjab government has delayed enacting the law - even though the CII's rulings are not binding.

The council has been issuing rulings for decades - with mixed results

Pakistan Senator Farhatullah Babar says the group suggested, back in 1978, that the Pakistan flag carry the words "Allahu Akbar" (God is great). But nobody bothered to implement the ruling.

In 1983, the CII ruled that political parties were contrary to the spirit of Islam, and that a presidential system was more Islamic than a parliamentary one.

This suited the ruler at the time, General Zia, who then barred political parties from contesting elections in 1985. However, he stopped short of instituting a presidential system fearing wider political turmoil,

In 1990s, the CII came up with another controversial ruling which successive governments have considered impractical.

They declared monetary interest un-Islamic and suggested that it be replaced with a system of profit-sharing between banks and their depositors, by investing in businesses that are not run on interest-based loans.

The ruling has not affected the banking system in Pakistan in any way except that interest is now called "mark-up" and some banks have set up separate desks of "Islamic banking" to cater to more "pious" depositors.

But it has had some impact when it comes to family and society

But while the CII has not been able to cut much ice with successive governments over matters of politics and finance, it has had more influence in matters concerning family life and social issues.

In these areas, it has had the backing of some religious groups, as well as a sympathetic military. For example, in the mid-1970s, Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's secular government was forced to comply with the CII's ruling to ban alcohol after religious groups resorted to street violence in support of the decree.

The CII has also thrown its weight behind groups that have discouraged parliamentarians from amending Pakistan's controversial blasphemy law.

It has also made other 'recommendations' for women

In January, a parliamentary committee dropped proposed legislation to increase the country's minimum marriageable age from 16 to 18, after the CII declared the move un-Islamic.

The council has also been campaigning to lower the marriageable age to 12 and nine for males and females respectively, "provided there are visible signs of puberty".

But successive governments have largely ignored that advice, so the minimum marriageable age in Pakistan has stayed at 16.

Pakistan honour killings on the rise, report reveals

Nearly 1,100 women were killed in Pakistan last year by relatives who believed they had dishonoured their families, the country's independent Human Rights Commission says.

BBC (01.04.2016) - <http://bbc.in/1RDapdd> - In its annual report the commission said 900 more women suffered sexual violence and nearly 800 took, or tried to take, their own lives.

In 2014 about 1,000 women died in honour-related attacks and 869 in 2013.

Correspondents say a large number of such crimes go unreported in Pakistan.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has said there is no place in Islam for killing in the name of family honour.

"The predominant causes of these killings in 2015 were domestic disputes, alleged illicit relations and exercising the right of choice in marriage," the report said.

Most of the 1,096 victims were shot, the report said, but attacks with acid were also common.

Among the cases highlighted in the report are a man who shot dead his two sisters in Sargodha, Punjab, because he believed they had "bad character" and three teenage girls killed by their male cousin for "dishonouring" their family in Pakpattan, Punjab.

The report said that 88 men were also the victims of honour killings last year.

In February, Punjab, the country's largest province, passed a landmark law criminalising all forms of violence against women.

However, more than 30 religious groups, including all the mainstream Islamic political parties, have threatened to launch protests if the law is not repealed.

Religious groups have equated women's rights campaigns with promotion of obscenity. They say the new Punjab law will increase the divorce rate and destroy the country's traditional family system.

Among the most infamous cases of honour killing in Pakistan was the stoning to death of Farzana Parveen in 2014 outside the High Court in Lahore. She had married against her family's wishes.

Her father, brother, cousin and former fiance were all found guilty of murder. Another brother received a 10-year jail sentence.

The issue of honour killings in Pakistan inspired a documentary film, *A Girl in the River - The Price of Forgiveness*, which won its creator, Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy, an Oscar at this year's Academy Awards.

In her acceptance speech, she said it was after seeing the film that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif had vowed to change the law on honour killings.

Top Punjab religious body rules that The Women's Protection Law is "un-Islamic"

Reuters (03.03.2016)- <http://reut.rs/1RseXCF> - A powerful Pakistani religious body that advises the government on the compatibility of laws with Islam on Thursday declared a new law that criminalizes violence against women to be "un-Islamic."

The Women's Protection Act, passed by Pakistan's largest province of Punjab last week, gives unprecedented legal protection to women from domestic, psychological and sexual violence. It also calls for the creation of a toll-free abuse reporting hot line and the establishment of women's shelters.

But since its passage in the Punjab assembly, many conservative clerics and religious leaders have denounced the new law as being in conflict with the Muslim holy book, the Koran, as well as Pakistan's constitution.

"The whole law is wrong," Muhammad Khan Sherani, the head of the Council of Islamic Ideology said at a news conference, citing verses from the Koran to point out that the law was "un-Islamic."

The 54-year-old council is known for its controversial decisions. In the past it has ruled that DNA cannot be used as primary evidence in rape cases, and it supported a law that

requires women alleging rape to get four male witnesses to testify in court before a case is heard.

The council's decision this January to block a bill to impose harsher penalties for marrying off girls as young as eight or nine has angered human rights activists.

The new law establishes district-level panels to investigate reports of abuse, and mandates the use of GPS bracelets to keep track of offenders.

It also sets punishments of up to a year in jail for violators of court orders related to domestic violence, with that period rising to two years for repeat offenders.

Fazlur Rehman, the chief of one of Pakistan's largest religious parties, the Jamiat-i-Ulema Islam, said the law was in conflict with both Islam and the constitution of Pakistan.

"This law makes a man insecure," he told journalists. "This law is an attempt to make Pakistan a Western colony again."

In 2013, more than 5,800 cases of violence against women were reported in Punjab alone, the province where Wednesday's law was passed, according to the Aurat Foundation, a women's rights advocacy group.

Those cases represented 74 percent of the national total that year, the latest for which data is available.

Christian women in Pakistan forcibly converted to Islam and married off to their kidnappers

Tahira, 21, and Reema Bibi, 20, were abducted near their home last December. The Muslim men who took them, raped them and forcibly married them, and then kept them segregated. At least 1,000 Christian women are forcibly converted in Pakistan each year. If they escape, the police arrests a family member.

AsiaNews.it (26.02.2016) - <http://bit.ly/1ROP16Q> - Tahira, 21, and Reema Bibi, 20, are two Pakistani Christian women who were abducted on 2 December 2015 from near their home in Sargodha (Punjab) as they returned together from work.

The two Muslim men who took the two young women, raped them, and then forcibly married them. Afterwards, they kept them segregated in their Islamabad home, this according to British Pakistani Christian Association (BPCA), an activist group that works for religious freedom in Pakistan, and monitors the continuous violations against minorities, especially women, which the government does not punish.

Forced marriages have been a scourge in the Muslim nation for years, one that does not seem close to any resolution. The case of Tahira and Reema is emblematic. On 11 February, Tahira managed to escape, but her Muslim "husband" filed a complaint with police, who immediately arrested six members of her family. The relatives were released thanks to pressure from human rights groups, but the authorities have ordered the family to return Tahira to her "husband."

The BPCA reported a similar case a few days ago. A Christian woman was seized and forced to marry the Muslim owner of the house where she worked as a cleaner. After she managed to escape thanks to a colleague, the police ordered her family to hand her over to the authorities; otherwise, they would arrest a relative.

According to a report by the Movement for Solidarity and Peace in Pakistan, at least 1,000 Pakistani women and girls are forced into Muslim marriages and made to convert to Islam each year. However, the real number is certainly much higher, since many incidents go unreported.

The aforementioned report found that forced marriages usually follow a similar pattern: females between the ages of 12 and 25 are abducted, made to convert to Islam, and then married to the abductor or an associate.

Even if a case goes to court, the victims are threatened and pressured by their "husband" and his family to declare that their conversion was voluntary.

Victims are often sexually abused, forced into prostitution, and suffer domestic abuse or even wind up in the human trafficking racket. Those who try to rebel are told that they "are now Muslims and that the punishment for apostasy is death".

In November 2015, the Pakistani Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Council of Islamic Ideology opposed a law on "forced conversion", sparking dismay and protests among Pakistani Hindus and Christians.

Since most minority Pakistanis are very poor, it is hard for them to have adequate political representation and receive justice.

That of forced marriages is just one of many issues that religious and ethnic minorities face as they are deprived of their rights, even though they are formally guaranteed by the Constitution.

A landmark Supreme Court ruling on 19 June 2014 took note of the injustice meted out to the country's minorities.

Headed by Chief Justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani, the bench included justices Azmat Saeed and Mushir Alam. It found that the government is complicitous in the acts of injustice. Unfortunately, the court's ruling did not spark any reaction from the government.

In the latest case, the Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has called for the return of Tahira and Reema to their families and criminal proceedings against their captors and rapists. Established in 1994, the AHRC is based in Hong Kong.

Bill banning child marriage fails in Pakistan after it's deemed 'un-Islamic'

The Washington Post (15.01.2016) - <http://wapo.st/1Sf3QmP> - Pakistani lawmakers had to withdraw a bill aimed at curbing the practice of child marriage after a prominent religious body declared the legislation un-Islamic.

The bill, which proposed raising the marriage age for females from 16 to 18, also called for harsher penalties for those who would arrange marriages involving children. Despite the laws in place, child marriages, particularly involving young female brides, are common in parts of the country. It's estimated that some 20 percent of girls in the country are married before they turn 18.

But the Council of Islamic Ideology, a constitutional body which gives advice to parliament on the compatibility of laws with Sharia, appeared to slap down the legislation

after deeming it "un-Islamic" and "blasphemous," according to Agence France Presse. It had already handed down a similar ruling in 2014.

The council has garnered opprobrium in the past. In 2013, reports AFP, "it suggested making DNA inadmissible evidence in rape cases, instead calling for the revival of an Islamic law that makes it mandatory for a survivor to provide four witnesses to back their claims."

Girls Not Brides, an international coalition of civil society organizations working against child marriage, cited this religious body as an obstacle toward reform. A number of provinces in Pakistan have pushed for legislation cracking down on child marriages, but implementing the law is more difficult.

Clerics on the council object to minimum age requirements, arguing instead that an individual can marry once reaching puberty, which can be as early as the age of 9.