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PAKISTAN: “Being a girl or a woman in Pakistan, especially in a minority”

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Manel Msalmi, International affairs Advisor of MEPs of the European Peoples’ Party at the European Parliament

HRWF (11.05.2023) – On 8 May, HRWF organized a conference

*titled "EU-Pakistan: Human rights, religious freedom and the GSP+", at the Press Club in Brussels. **MEP Peter van Dalen** who has for years been a staunch defender of human rights in Pakistan could not be present but he sent us a **video** (Minute 14'32") with a strong message on the issue.*

NGO representatives in Belgium, Pakistan, Italy and the US participated in the event addressing a series of serious issues. HRWF has the pleasure to present you parts of Manel Msalmi's contribution to the debate:

In Pakistan, there is an increasing issue with girls and women of minority religions, such as Hindus and Christians.

Hindus make about 2% of Pakistan's estimated 220 million people, whereas Christians make up less than 1%.

Kidnappings, forced conversions and forced marriages of Hindu girls

Every year, there are reports of hundreds of forced conversion incidents. Most victims are from poor families and disadvantaged households.

In the southern province of Sindh, which is home to nearly 90% of the Hindu minority group, forced conversions to Islam of kidnapped Hindu girls and their subsequent forced weddings to Muslim men—usually to the abductors—are quite common.

Unfortunately, forcible conversions have not been made illegal in Pakistan by any of the successive administrations.

International reports recently said that at least 50 members of Hindu families in the Sindh province are known to have been forcibly converted.

A recent report that was presented to the United Nations Human Rights Council regarding the phenomenon of abduction, forced religious conversion, and forced marriage of young girls belonging to religious minorities, particularly Christians and Hindus, has been welcomed by Christian communities, Hindus, and civil society organizations in Pakistan.

A group of independent experts and special rapporteurs, including the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women and the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief, called for “immediate measures to address these cases and justice for the victims” in an appeal that was made in Geneva on 16 January last.

Unfortunately, for fear of powerful Islamist religious lobbies, neither the judiciary nor any other state institution is dealing with the phenomenon. For instance, despite the fact that the bill prohibiting the conversion of anyone under the age of 18 was passed by the Sindh Provincial Assembly in 2016, the local governor has yet to sign it, out of concern for widespread protests.

Advocacy in the media and art

Fortunately, these cases continue to be covered by Pakistani media, which is a very positive example of engagement. Media outlets recently reported the kidnapping and rape of a Hindu young woman in the Sindh province because she refused to convert to Islam.

The documentary film "The Losing Side," which was shown at the Cannes Film Festival in 2022 and won an award in the category of "Best Human Rights Film," also mentioned the phenomenon of abductions and forced conversions in Sindh. Media and art are engaged to counter extremism and violence against women.

A protest march was recently organized by several members of Pakistan's Hindu minority to raise awareness about the danger of Hindu girls and women being forced into marriage and conversion.

A member of the Pakistan Darawar Ittehad (PDI), a Hindu association, stated, "We wanted to highlight this big problem of the Sindhi Hindus, especially in the rural areas where our young girls, some as young as 12 and 13, are abducted in broad daylight, forced to convert to Islam, and then married off to older Muslim men."

In Sindh, such cases have increased in recent months, filling the lower courts with applications from parents seeking the return of their daughters, sisters, and wives.

Sadly, no delegate from the government paid any attention to the requests of the peaceful protesters.

In 2019, the Sindh Assembly took up the issue of Hindu girls being kidnapped and forcefully converted in various districts of the province. A bill making this practice illegal was proposed but was rejected by the Assembly. In 2021, another bill suffered the same fate.

In January 2023, twelve human rights experts from the United Nations voiced their concern regarding the rising number of kidnappings, forced conversions and marriages of girls as young as 13 in Pakistan.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said in its last report that approximately 1,000 girls are forced to convert to Islam every year.

Being a woman in Pakistan

While women in Pakistan keep on enduring the worst part of constrained relationships, especially when they have been abducted, some have chosen to escape and to expose such injustices.

Pakistan is also confronting honor killings cases. Insights from the Common Freedoms Commission of Pakistan mention that there were 1,276 such homicides from 2014 to 2016. Even though the Pakistani Parliament passed a law that prohibits killings related to honor, they go on unabated, particularly in rural

areas where many of them are not reported and remain unpunished.

Pakistani women are being culturally treated as second class citizens, especially when it comes to female education and job opportunities. The literacy rate for women is only 45%, which is very low when compared to the literacy rate for men, which is 69%.

Gender inequality is a global problem but in Pakistan it is at the root of many issues. It is regrettable that due to widespread illiteracy and a gender-based bias, Pakistani society is largely ignoring the gender imbalance and the vicious cycle of violence.

Conclusion

To conclude, the situation of women and girls in Pakistan whether they are Hindu, Christian or Muslim is critical. There is a need to empower young women and girls mainly with regard to education and economic opportunities as well as to stop violence against them, in particular in the framework of forced marriages and forced conversions in the case of young Hindu and Christian girls. The EU and the international community as well as women's rights and human rights organizations should act to protect minor girls.

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Further reading about FORB in Pakistan on HRWF website

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