

Violations of women's rights in religious minorities in Pakistan

Conference at the Italian Parliament



LIREC (25.06.2019) – www.lirec.net – On the 18th of June 2019 Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD), in collaboration with LiREC, held a press conference at the Press room of the Italian Parliament in Rome, concerning the human rights violations faced by women belonging to religious minorities in Pakistan.

Shortly before the beginning of the Press Conference, Juliette Rierink (GHRD) was interviewed by the national Italian newspaper agency "Dire", which asked her to explain the content and the aim of the human rights report on

Pakistan published by GHRD in March 2019 – as it would be presented during the conference. Lawyer Sasuie Abbas Leghari was also interviewed and asked to report a relevant case of international protection claimed in the UK on the basis of religious discrimination suffered in Pakistan.

Speakers:

- Raffaella di Marzio – Director of the Centre for Studies on Freedom of Religion, Belief and Conscience;
- Stefano Ceccanti – Member of the Italian Parliament, constitutional lawyer and writer;
- Stefania Pucciarelli – Member of the Italian Parliament and President of the Commission for the promotion of Human Rights;
- Valeria Fedeli – Member of the Italian Parliament and member of the Commission for the Promotion of Human Rights;
- Juliette Rierink – Human Rights Officer GHRD
- Sasuie Abbas Leghari – Immigration lawyer born in Pakistan and working in the United Kingdom for the Sindh Immigration Service;
- Sara Tosoni – Legal intern at GHRD (helping with translations ITA/ENG)

Raffaella di Marzio opened the press conference by introducing the speakers and the subject of the meeting. She also thanked Stefano Ceccanti for supporting the conference, organized by LiREC and GHRD.

The constitutional lawyer, Ceccanti, stressed the importance of welcoming human rights monitoring initiatives within the Italian political institutions, as technical knowledge about the worldwide human rights situation is the precondition for properly carrying out parliamentary duties.

Stefania Pucciarelli said she was honoured to receive the invitation to the Conference, as the information related to

the topic could be worthy for the Italian Commission of human rights, which is currently working on the issue of forced marriages and the protection of both religious minorities and women's rights.

Valeria Fedeli added that the promotion and the protection of minority rights is a fundamental national duty, as the situation of minority groups in a country often reflects the State's overall commitment to European and international human rights obligations. Raffaella di Marzio took to the floor, reporting the efforts of LiREC in demanding the Italian Parliament to uphold the European Union Guidelines on freedom of religion or belief entirely. These Guidelines require the EU Member States to take external actions against all religious human rights violations, wherever they occur.

Raffaella di Marzio introduced Global Human Rights Defence, noting that its human rights report 2019 has been taken up, in its entirety, by the Members of the European Parliament, who called on Pakistan to take effective measures to safeguard religious minorities' rights on its territory.

Religious minorities in Pakistan

Juliette Rierink introduced the work of Global Human Rights Defence, an NGO which focuses on the development of minority rights in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Through both policy-change and society-building strategies, GHRD contributes to change by human rights monitoring and investigation, lobbying and advocacy and empowerment of the local population. Juliette Rierink presented the 2019 GHRD human rights report on Pakistan, which specifically concerns the violations against women belonging to religious minorities (Christians, Hindus, Ahmadiyyas, Sikhs and Shias).

Girls belonging to these minority groups face abduction, rape, forced conversion and forced marriage committed by extremists of the Muslim majority community. These disturbing facts have

caused the number of religious minorities in Pakistan to decrease from 23% of the population in 1947, to only 3.7% in 2017. Juliette concluded her speech by calling on the international community to come together and urge Pakistan to work towards the sustainable and effective implementation of religious minority rights.

Sasuiie Abbas Leghari began to speak by stressing how, in the cases of forced conversions, the victims are abducted and then subject to emotional and physical abuse. The police often refuse to record a first investigation report, and additionally, both the lower and high court of Pakistan fail to follow the proper procedure. Investigations are absent or insufficient and most of the time the police and media simply chose to believe the account of abductor.

During the conference, the short GHRD documentary 'Girls of Pakistan' was screened. This documentary showed the effects of discrimination, forced conversions and blasphemy law in Pakistan. The documentary was mostly focused on a march facilitated by GHRD and held in The Hague on International Women's Day 2019. Civil society, activists and politicians gathered together to raise awareness about the issue of forced conversions in Pakistan and to submit a petition organised by GHRD to the Dutch Parliament.

Questions during the press conference

The first question was raised by Elisabetta Nistri, President of the Women's Federation for World Peace – Italy, who asked: through which mechanisms does GHRD interact with the United Nations? Juliette Rierink replied that GHRD has ECOSOC status and is able to actively participate in the UN Human Rights Council Session, therefore GHRD can keep human rights violations in South Asia on the UN agenda. Additionally, cases are often sent through the UN urgent appeal mechanisms, and GHRD are in regular contact with Special Rapporteurs.

Thereafter Gioia Li gave an account of the persecution that members of religious communities face in China by the Government. She also addressed the speakers in order to know how to raise awareness about this severe human rights situation in China among the international community and how to produce effective policy changes. To answer to this question, and subsequently to conclude the press conference, Juliette Rierink, Sasuie Leghari and Raffaella di Marzio stressed the importance of empowerment and education in order for human rights and equality to be effectively implemented.

The plight of minorities – as with other vulnerable categories – essentially derives from the biased and dangerous conception of considering some human beings as inferior and unequal. This is the reason why it is fundamental to create a culture of humanity, equality and tolerance in order to stand up for human rights globally in name of their universality.