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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Jubilee Campaign, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[3 February 2023]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

## **Abductions, Forced Faith Conversions, and Underaged Marriages of Christian girls in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan**

Jubilee Campaign would like to raise to the Council's attention the concerning trend by which Christian girls in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan are kidnapped, forcibly converted to Islam, and coerced into child marriage.

### **Introduction**

In Pakistan, where Islam is the legally recognized state religion and the faith of choice for the majority of the population (96.47%, 207.684 million people), Islamic traditional values influence the country's legislation and judicial decisions. Regrettably, a horrific trend that has gained international condemnation is the kidnapping, forced conversion to Islam, and coerced marriages of underaged Pakistani Christian girls. Additionally, in violation of national laws which prohibit the solemnization of child marriages, judicial actors have permitted such marriages despite the evidence provided to them of the victims' statuses as minors, the circumstances of their abductions, and the human rights violations they are subjected to while in the captivity of their kidnappers.

### **Statistics**

A 2022 report by Voice for Justice and Jubilee Campaign examined cases of Christian minority girls' abductions, conversions, and marriages between January 2019 and October 2022. It should be noted that hundreds of cases go unreported due to victims' families' lack of access to media, threats by perpetrators, and state actor complicity. Estimates indicate that likely upwards of one thousand cases occur in Pakistan annually.

Our report identified 100 cases throughout the past nearly four years, the majority of which took place in 2021 (42 cases), followed by 2019 (27 cases), 2020 (12 cases), and the first ten months of 2022 (19 cases). In every observed year (2019, 2020, 2021, 2022), the vast majority of cases occurred in Punjab (86%), followed by Sindh (11%), Islamabad (2%), and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (1%). With regards to the ages of the girl victims, 61% were under the age of 18 years, 18% were between the ages of 16 and 18 years, and 14% were over 18 years; 7% of victims' ages were not reported. According to a small sample of ten noteworthy cases, the average age difference between the victims and their kidnappers who they are forced to marry was 29.9 years. The largest age difference in our sample was 36 years, reported in a case of a 45-year-old man who abducted a 9-year-old girl. The smallest age difference in our sample was 24 years, reported in a case of a 37-year-old man who kidnapped a 13-year-old girl.

### **Additional Observations**

- In many observed cases, the victim girls are forcibly married to men who are twice their age or more and who are already married with children near the victims' age.
- Child abductees and brides in Pakistan – and globally – are at a higher risk of school dropout, health complications, and lower employment rates and earnings.

- Even in cases in which girl victims are rescued and returned to their family, they are often rejected by their community due to the stigma surrounding sexual activity, which many victims are forcibly subjected to by their perpetrators; this negative bias is exacerbated in cases in which the victims became pregnant during their captivity.
- Girl survivors of abduction, forced conversion, and coerced marriage exhibit higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, and detachment.
- In some cases, the abduction and captivity of Pakistani Christian girls is accompanied by other human rights violations, including: forced ingestion of drugs and alcohol; physical assault; penetrative rape and sexual violence; forced domestic and/or manual labor; and more.

### *Contributing Factors*

*Perceived Link between Religion and State* – Many perpetrators of these cases of kidnapping, forced conversion to Islam, and child marriage, and supporters thereof, believe the strength and purity of the nation is contingent upon the singular religious identity of its citizens, and therefore they believe that converting girls to Islam is an act to further the majority faith. In fact, Pakistan’s National Database and Registration Authority legally prohibits religious conversions away from Islam, meanwhile it permits conversions from minority faiths to Islam.

*State Actors’ Acceptance of Fraudulent Documentation and Rejection of Authentic Documentation* – Many courts, judges, and police continue to accept false documentation provided by the perpetrators that allege that the victims are above 18 years of age and, in some cases, that the perpetrators are already married. In an example of non-state actor complicity, these false documents are often either fabricated or solemnized by religious institutions, mosques, and Muslim clerics. Regrettably, in many cases, courts will accept victim statements in which abducted and forcibly married girls testify in favor of the perpetrators. These statements are often recorded under duress, as victims are threatened with violence to them or their family should they continue pursuing justice. Contrarily, these courts will dismiss or ignore crucial evidence of the circumstances of the crime, such as distressed calls from victims to their families, and veritable documentation – including birth certificates, medical examination results, and school records – which confirm the underage status of the girl victims.

*Complicity of Police* – In many instances, police and security forces have rejected victims’ families’ requests for investigation and rescue of their abducted girl relatives, or otherwise have either unjustly delayed or conducted insufficient investigations of reports of abduction, forced conversion, and marriage of Christian girls. Police have also been reported providing incorrect charge sheets and failing to record victims’ statements, and they generally lack knowledge of laws prohibiting abduction and forced child marriages. Finally, in the majority of studied cases, police do not place victims in protective custody and instead return them to their perpetrators’ custody, where they may face further abuse, intimidation, and threats.

*Obstacles to Minorities’ Access to Justice* – As discussed briefly earlier in this submission, many faith minorities are reluctant to report cases of abduction of their girl family members due to the stigma that is attached to the kidnapping and any sexual violence that occurs in connection with the abduction. Other faith minorities may wish to seek justice for their kidnapped relatives but lack the financial assets to do so, as pursuing court cases is costly. In many cases, faith minorities are subjected to high rates of intimidation and harassment by Muslims who wish to prevent them

from registering cases against predominantly Muslim perpetrators. Finally, faith minorities are sometimes reluctant to raise cases due to their lack of confidence in the police and other state actors' ability or willingness to respond to reports of abduction.

*Failed Attempts to Pass Relevant Legislation* – In 2016, the Sindh Assembly passed the Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill which legally prohibited forced religious conversions, but Governor Saeed-uz-Zaman Siddiqui rejected the bill. Legislators Naveed Aamir Jeeval and Ramesh Kumar Vankwani introduced separate bills outlawing forced conversion, as well as Senator Muhammad Javed Abbasi; however, all three were discarded by the Standing Committees of the National Assembly and the Senate. In 2021, the Prohibition of Forced Conversions Bill introduced by Muslim members of the Parliamentary Committee to Protect Minorities from Forced Conversions was opposed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Council of Islamic Ideology for supposedly being against Sharia principles.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

Jubilee Campaign makes the following recommendations to Pakistani authorities:

1. Establish an independent committee of experts, comprised of jurists and human rights activists to collaborate and prepare a bill which safeguards faith minorities against forced religious conversion.
2. Conduct research on the prevalence and scale of abductions, forced conversions, and child marriages in Pakistan, and ensure that such research is presented in the parliament for discussion and further action.
3. Comprehensively train police officers and judicial officials in domestic law prohibiting child marriage, as well as international human rights legislation.
4. Ensure that faith conversions are regulated and testified by a competent court, and that certificates of faith conversion are issued by authorized and unbiased entities and registered with the government.
5. Ensure that cases involving allegations of forced child marriage, forced conversions, and sexual violence of girls from faith minority communities are independently and impartially investigated with a view to all conditions of coercion or threat under which such marriages are contracted and alleged religious conversions are made.
6. Ensure that abducted girls are timely and safely recovered from the captivity of their abductors.
7. Ensure that, in addition to the prompt rescue and return of victims to their families, prosecution of perpetrators is pursued with legal punishments commensurate to the crime(s) committed.