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**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.

[20 May 2024]

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

Structural and Physical Violence against Faith Minority Women and Girls

Item 3: Interactive Dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls

Background

Women and girls in theocratic nations face binary persecution due to the intersection of their gender and religious identity. Structural violence, including lack of legal protection, and restrictions on education and employment, trap women and girls in cycles of poverty and dependence. This economic vulnerability makes them more susceptible to exploitation and abuse, and more specifically creates conditions that facilitate physical violence. Conversely, the experience of physical and sexual violence reinforces systemic inequities and social exclusions, especially for female survivors of faith communities which value purity and emphasize patriarchal norms. This dual persecution results in profound physical, psychological, and social harm, severely limiting the opportunities and well-being of religious women and girls; this is doubly felt by those professing minority faiths or no faith whatsoever.

A Self-Perpetuating Cycle of Structural and Physical Violence

Islamic theocracies operating on may employ structural violence against women through various means, systematically embedding discrimination and repression within their political, legal, and social structures. In August 2021, following its seizure of power in Afghanistan, the Taliban dissolved the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and inaugurated the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, a body tasked with implementing Islamic rules.¹ Over the course of just three months from September to December 2021, the Taliban proscribed girls from receiving high school education; barred their attendance in tertiary and university schools; disbanded female athletics programs; prohibited women’s appearance on television dramas, soap operas, and entertainment shows; banned them from solo long distance travel unaccompanied by male guardians; required female news presenters to wear headscarves; and instructed taxi drivers to reject unveiled female customers.⁽²⁾ In May 2022, Taliban leaders issued a decree obligating all women and girls to stay at home and, in the case that they may need to go out in public, wear a loose-fitting full-body covering known as a burqa. In November 2022, the Taliban declared that women are no longer permitted to use public gyms and visit parks.² Throughout the course of 2023, the Taliban has initiated a “gender apartheid”, shutting down all beauty salons - essentially eliminating 60,000 female jobs and eradicating one of the few remaining predominantly female public arenas - and prohibiting women from working in aid organizations where their gender sensitivity is indispensable.³

Similar curtailments of the rights and freedoms of women are being expanded in Iran, where Guidance Patrol authorities - known colloquially as the ‘morality police’ - lurk the streets and arrest individuals found to be allegedly violating “religious taboos”. The most common ‘offense’ is women and girls’ appearance in public settings “without a proper hijab”.⁴ Women-led protests against Iran’s mandatory hijab policies have existed since the late 2010s, however they intensified in September 2022 after the death in police custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini. Amini had been arrested by Guidance Patrol authorities ‘improperly’ wearing a headscarf; state-controlled media announced days later that she had died of a heart attack while detained. Human rights activists reject this narrative, citing that she had been transferred to Kasra Hospital within two hours of her arrest and was declared

¹ Al Jazeera, “Taliban replaces ministry for women with ‘guidance’ ministry”, 18 September 2021.

² Voice of America, “Taliban Official: Women Banned from Afghanistan’s Gyms”, 10 November 2022.

³ Akmal Dawi, “UN Security Council Takes Aim at ‘Gender Apartheid’ in Afghanistan”, *Voice of America*, 26 September 2023. ; Heather Barr, “The Taliban and the Global Backlash Against Women’s Rights”, *Human Rights Watch*, 6 February 2024.

⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Religious Garb Restrictions and International Human Rights Law*, November 2023.

brain dead upon arrival, presenting with bruises and other indicators of blunt force trauma.⁵ Medical scans depicting skull fractures, hemorrhaging, and brain swelling have caused a widespread consensus that she had been tortured by Iranian state actors.⁶ One year later in October 2023, 16-year-old Armita Geravand was accosted by authorities on a subway for not wearing a hijab; her friends witnessed one of the police beating her unconscious with a metal object. After weeks in a coma, Geravand died, with state media making the absurd claim that she had sustained injuries due to a “fainting spell” she experienced during her confrontation with police.⁷ In April 2024 Iran launched the “Noor” campaign to enforce the hijab laws and crack down on violators thereof. Immediately following the commencement, videos circulated on social media of young teenage girls being apprehended by authorities and shoved into vehicles for transportation to detention and interrogation facilities.⁸

In some nations, personal status laws go beyond restrictions on women and girls’ public lives to encroach upon their private affairs, including interpersonal relationships, marriages, divorces, child custody, inheritance, and more. Sudan, for example, does not permit marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men. Former prisoner of conscience Mariam Ibraheem was born to a Muslim father but, upon his abandonment, was raised by her mother in the Ethiopian Orthodox faith. Upon her marriage to a Christian man in 2014, Mariam was convicted of apostasy and sentenced to death; the court argued that she was legally a Muslim as she was born to a Muslim father, and therefore she committed the severest of crimes by marrying a Christian man. Mariam, despite having lived as a Christian her whole life, was pregnant at the time of her detention and was forced to give birth to her daughter while shackled to the floor of a prison cell. Fortunately, international advocacy and outcry over her situation led to her acquittal, and she has spent the past decade being a human rights and religious freedom activist.⁹

Underage faith minority girls in countries such as Egypt and Pakistan are susceptible to violations including forced religious conversion and child marriage, due to both their status as Christians (and Hindus) in Islam-majority countries, and the absence - or negligent implementation - of legislations which guarantee their safety as children and rights as minorities. Such is an example of how structural violence directly enables physical violence. Pakistan’s 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act remains in effect and prohibits the marriage of girls under the age of 16 years, although Muslim male perpetrators force their victims to convert to Islam so that they can exploit a legal loophole wherein Sharia law permits the betrothal of girls who have experienced their first menstrual cycle. Approximately one thousand Pakistani Christian and Hindu girls are abducted, converted, and married annually, and attempts to introduce bills raising the minimum age of marriage to 18 years for girls have been rebuffed by Muslim senators and the Council of Islamic Ideology. Concurrently, judges and courts, Muslim clerics, and Islamic political parties collude to solemnize unlawful marriages, accepting religious conversion documents and fabricated birth certificates which raise the alleged ages of the victims, and simultaneously overlooking authentic records which indicate the real minor status of the underage victims (i.e., medical examinations, dental age estimation, school transcripts).¹⁰ A similar trend unfolds in Egypt, where Salafist networks identify Coptic girls - often by their wearing of cross necklaces and their lack of headscarves - who they then lure into romantic relationships with Muslim men who subsequently force the girls to renounce Christianity and ‘marry into’ Islam. The government, aware of this illicit scheme, refuses to investigate cases of missing Coptic girls and, instead, knowingly and maliciously perpetuates the lie that they have abandoned their previous lives and become Muslim by choice.¹¹

The interplay of gender inequality, legal and economic disempowerment, displacement, militarization, cultural stigmatization, and the breakdown of support systems all contribute

⁵ United Nations, “Iran: UN experts demand accountability for death of Mahsa Amini, call for end to violence against women”, 22 September 2022.

⁶ Al Arabiya News, “Mahsa Ahmini’s medical scans show skull fractures caused by ‘severe trauma’: Report”, 19 September 2022.

⁷ Christopher F. Schuetze, “Iranian Teenager Dies Weeks After Mysterious Collapse”, *The New York Times*, 30 October 2023.

⁸ Deepa Parent, “Iranian women violently dragged from streets by police amid hijab crackdown”, *The Guardian*, 24 April 2024.

⁹ BBC News, “Sudan apostasy woman Mariam Ibrahim ‘to campaign’”, 28 September 2014.

¹⁰ Voice for Justice & Jubilee Campaign, *Conversion without Consent*, November 2022.

¹¹ Jubilee Campaign, *Forced and Child Marriage as an Obstacle to the Effective Enjoyment of Human Rights by Women and Girls in Egypt, Nigeria, and Pakistan*.

to increasing the risks faced by women in conflict zones. During the Tigray War between 2020 and 2022, Eritrean forces inflicted sexual violence (i.e., gang rape, forced sterilization) against the largely Christian female population. In northern Iraq and Syria, Islamic State troops maintain captivity of nearly 3,000 minority Yazidi women and girls as sexual slaves and domestic servants, many of whom they forced to convert to Islam. Similarly, Islamic State and Boko Haram in Nigeria hold hundreds of women hostage as sex slaves and Muslim wives, although many were young girls at the time of their kidnappings years ago.
