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OHCHR – UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (Author)

Pakistan: UN experts alarmed by lack of protection for minority girls from forced religious conversions and forced marriage

GENEVA (11 April 2024) – UN experts* today expressed dismay at the continuing lack of protection for young women and girls belonging to minority communities in Pakistan.

“Christian and Hindu girls remain particularly vulnerable to forced religious conversion, abduction, trafficking, child, early and forced marriage, domestic servitude and sexual violence,” the experts said. “The exposure of young women and girls belonging to religious minority communities to such heinous human rights violations and the impunity of such crimes can no longer be tolerated or justified.”

The experts expressed concern that forced marriages and religious conversions of girls from religious minorities which have been coerced are validated by the courts, often invoking religious law to justify keeping victims with their abductors rather than allowing them to return them to their parents. “Perpetrators often escape accountability, with police dismissing crimes under the guise of ‘love marriages’,” they said.

The experts stressed that child, early and forced marriage cannot be justified on religious or cultural grounds. They underlined that, under international law, consent is irrelevant when the victim is a child under the age of 18.

“A woman’s right to choose a spouse and freely enter into marriage is central to her life, dignity and equality as a human being and must be protected and upheld by law,” the experts said. They stressed the need

for provisions to invalidate, annul or dissolve marriages contracted under duress, with due consideration for the women and girls concerned, and to ensure access to justice, remedy, protection and adequate assistance for victims.

The experts highlighted specific cases of forced religious conversions, including Mishal Rasheed – a young girl who was abducted at gunpoint from her home while preparing for school in 2022. Rasheed was sexually assaulted, forcibly converted to Islam and forced to marry her abductor. They also noted that on 13 March 2024, a 13-year-old Christian girl was allegedly abducted, forcibly converted to Islam and married to her abductor after her age was recorded as 18 on the marriage certificate. Notwithstanding the right of children to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in accordance with article 14 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, change of religion or belief in all circumstances must be free, without coercion and undue inducements. Pakistan needs to uphold its obligations in relation to article 18 of the ICCPR and prohibit forced religious conversions.

“The Pakistani authorities must enact and rigorously enforce laws to ensure that marriages are contracted only with the free and full consent of the intended spouses, and that the minimum age for marriage is raised to 18, including for girls,” the experts said. “All women and girls must be treated without discrimination, including those belonging to the Christian and Hindu communities, or indeed other religions and beliefs.”

They urged Pakistan to bring perpetrators to justice, enforce existing legal protections against child, early and forced marriage, abduction and trafficking of minority girls, and uphold the country’s international human rights obligations.

The experts expressed their concerns in a [communication](#), followed by a [press release](#) issued on 16 January 2023.

ecoi.net description:

UN experts concerned as girls from the Christian and Hindu religious minorities are exposed to conversion, abduction, trafficking, as well as early and forced marriages

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