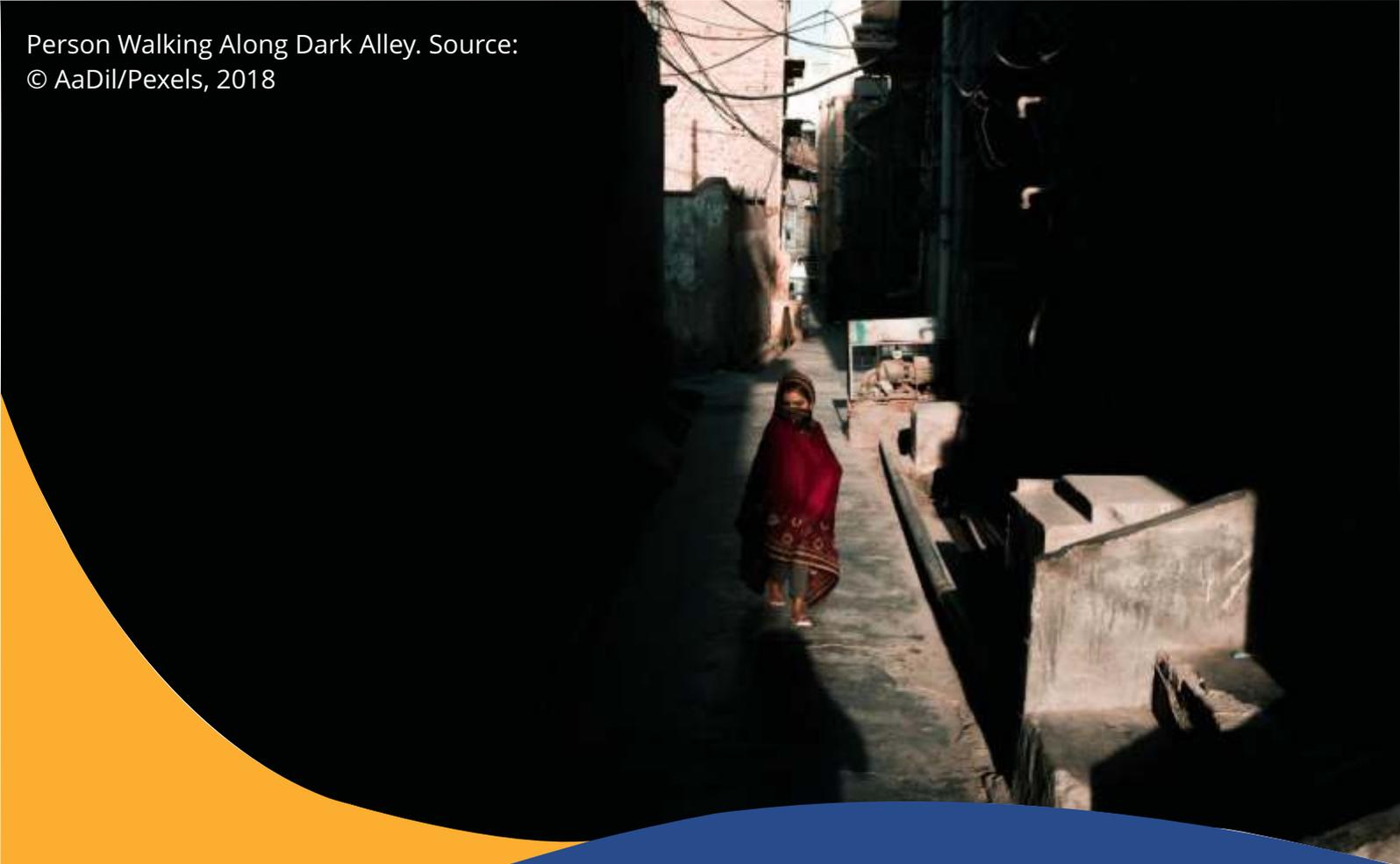


Person Walking Along Dark Alley. Source:  
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# Monthly Report Team Pakistan

*February 2022*



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## Aim of the report

This monthly report aims to throw light on some of the recent events in the context of long-standing and structural human rights issues against minorities and marginalised groups in Pakistan. It seeks to highlight and present an accurate picture of the most relevant human rights violations that occurred in February 2022. By highlighting these issues, the report aims to raise awareness of the ongoing systemic problems, start building consensus and play a part in creating momentum for introspection, change and meaningful reforms.

The monthly report begins with a general introduction of Pakistan, followed by an overview of Pakistan's minority groups, religions and a legal framework. The report covers the most significant human rights violations related to women's rights, blasphemy, LGBTQ+ and minorities. In addition, it also highlights some positive developments, such as the prohibition of child marriage by the Islamabad High Court.

## Overview of the country

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan (IRP) was formed in 1947 after the British partitioned the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan, basing its action primarily on the geographical distribution of Hindus and Muslims (Ahmed & Gulrajani, 2020). When the partition occurred, it displaced between 10 to 20 million people along religious lines, which created an overwhelming refugee crisis in the newly constituted dominions. The separation into India and Pakistan, with two sections, West and East, was never satisfactorily resolved, as seen in the third war between the two countries in 1971 and the ongoing dispute over Kashmir (NationsOnline, n.d.).

The State of Pakistan is situated between the Karakoram mountain range, the Himalayas, with China in the northwest, the Arabian sea in the south and India in the east. The State is the fifth most populous country in the world and has a population of more than 220 million people as of 2021. Its capital is the city of Islamabad, whereas the largest port, city and business centre is Karachi. The second-largest city is Lahore and other major cities are Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, Multan, Gujranwala, Hyderabad, Peshawar and Quetta. Pakistan's main religion is Islam, which amounts to 98 per cent of the total population. The spoken languages are Urdu, English, Punjabi, Dari, Balochi and Pashto (NationsOnline, n.d.). The country is heavily dependent on its textiles industry, also the production of carpet and rugs, with export of such products becoming the main driving force for the economic growth. However, Pakistan has still fallen short in attracting foreign investment and aiding the reduction of poverty (US.News., n.d.).

Moreover, Pakistan is a nuclear State, as the country's nuclear weapons program was established in 1971 and conducted its own testing in 1998 (NationsOnline, n.d.). The Chief of State is the President, who currently is Arif Alvi. He is a long-standing member of the governing Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party and has served two terms as a member of parliament. He was elected by the parliament to succeed Mamnoon Hussain, whose five-year term ended in September 2018. Pakistan is a parliamentary republic where the Prime Minister wields the most power, but presidents have often played key roles in constitutional crises. The head of government is the Prime Minister. The current Prime Minister is Imran Khan, a former international cricket player. He rose to victory in the 2018 general election on a pledge to end corruption. He turned to politics in 1996 with his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, which achieved a breakthrough at the national level in 2013. Furthermore, the President appoints the cabinet upon the advice of the prime supreme, upon the advice of the Prime Minister (BBC, 2019). Pakistan is a federal country and consists of a Senate and National Assembly. The country's legal system is based in common law, with a large Islamic influence (NationsOnline, n.d.).

## Overview of the country's minority groups & religions

Pakistan is a country characterised by diverse cultures, languages and ethnicities (Minority Rights Group International (MRGI), 2019). Despite the prominent diversity in religions, languages and ethnicities in the country, there has been no definition of the term, "minorities", in the Constitution, apart from some occasional uses of the word in the 1973 Constitution (MRGI, 2019). Yet, the major minority groups in Pakistan are overall known to include religious, ethnic and linguistic minorities, and the LGBTQ+ community.

Regarding religious diversity, Pakistan is an Islamic republic, and its official religion is Islam, which is declared in Article 2 of the Constitution (Pakistani Constitution, Article 2). Yet, Article 20 of the Constitution proclaims freedom of religion and presents every citizen the right to practise and promote their religions (Pakistani Constitution, Article 20). According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2022), 96.28 percent of the population are Muslim, 1.59 percent are Christian, 1.6 percent are Hindu, and 0.22 percent are Ahmadi. However, not all Muslims in Pakistan are Sunni. In fact, around 15-20 percent of the Muslim population are Shia, making them a part of religious minority groups in the country (Pew Research Center, 2009).

As to ethnic minorities, they consist of Sindhis (14.1%), Pashtuns (15.42%), Mohajirs (7.57%) and Baluchis (3.57%) (MRGI, 2019). Moreover, while the national language of the country is Urdu and there are other main languages like Sindhi, Punjabi, Pashto and Baluchi, there are also minority languages like Hindko, Brahui, Kashmiri, Burushaski, Kalash and so on (MRGI, 2019). Yet, in the recent decades, there has been a rise in nationalism and a surging emphasis on the Islamic image of Pakistan, which have had adverse implications for religious and ethnic minorities in the country (MRGI, 2019). Noteworthy, like Christians and Hindus, Shia Muslims in Pakistan have also experienced discrimination and persecution due to the Sunni-Shia divide (MRGI, 2019). In regard to the LGBTQ+ community, they receive strong disapproval and face persecution in the conservative and Muslim-majority society of Pakistan. It has been found by the Pew Research Center (2013) that Pakistan is among the countries least tolerant of homosexuality - only 2 percent of the Pakistani population expressed approval of it in a survey.

## Overview of legal frameworks

### 4.1. Transgender People

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018 was enacted “to provide for protection, relief and rehabilitation of rights of the transgender persons and their welfare and for matters connected therewith and incidental thereto” (Preamble)<sup>1</sup>. The Act defines “transgender person” under Article 2(1)<sup>2</sup> (n). Chapter II of the Act deals with “recognition of Identity of Transgender Person”. Article 2 declares that “A transgender person shall have a right to be recognized as per his or her self-perceived gender identity, as such, in accordance with the provisions of this Act.” Chapter III declares “Prohibition of Certain Acts”. Article 4 prohibits discrimination or unfair treatment on the enlisted grounds against a transgender person, for instance, “employment, trade or occupation<sup>3</sup>”.

Additionally, Article 4, prohibits, harassment on the basis of “sex, gender identity and gender expression”. Chapter IV, Article 6 declares “Obligations of the Government” to take steps to secure full and effective participation of transgender persons and their inclusion in society. Chapter V is also significant because it specifies the “Protection of Rights of Transgender Persons”, such as the “Right to Inherit”. Furthermore, Article 16 guarantees that “fundamental rights mentioned in Part II of Chapter 1 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan shall be available unequivocally for every transgender person”. Lastly, Chapter VI, Article 18 allows for an “Enforcement Mechanism” for the aforementioned rights and remedies. It allows the transgender person to have the right to lodge a complaint to the Federal Ombudsman, National Commission for Status of Women and National Commission on Human Rights (NCHR) if any of these rights are denied to him or her<sup>4</sup>.

### 4.2. Blasphemy

The Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) defines categories of blasphemy offences relating to religion in Chapter XV. The laws range from the defilement of places of worship (punishable by a two-year prison sentence or a fine, or both, Section 295 of the Penal Code) to insulting the Prophet Muhammad by written or spoken word or by visible representation (punishable by death or life imprisonment and a fine, Section 295 – C of the PPC. It further prohibits insulting Muhammad by innuendo or insinuation, and where the language used does not require proof of blasphemous intent<sup>5</sup>.

1. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2018.
2. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2018, Sec. 2(1)(n) (2018).
3. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2018, article 4.
4. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act of 2018.
5. Pakistan Penal Code 1898, Act XV.

Section 295	Destroying, damaging or defiling a place of worship or sacred object with intent to insult the religion of any class of persons. The person may be arrested without a warrant. <sup>6</sup>	Imprisonment for 2 years, or fine, or both <sup>7</sup> .
Section 295-A	Maliciously insulting the religion or the religious beliefs of any class <sup>8</sup> .	Ditto*
Section 295-B	Defiling, etc., the Holy Quran <sup>9</sup> .	Imprisonment for life <sup>10</sup> .
Section 295-C	Use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet <sup>11</sup> .	Death, or imprisonment for life and fine <sup>12</sup> .
Section 296	Causing a disturbance to an assembly engaged in religious worship <sup>13</sup> .	Imprisonment for one year or fine, or both <sup>14</sup> .
Section 297	Trespassing in place of worship or disturbing a funeral with intention to wound the feelings or to insult the religion of any person or offering indignity to a human corpse <sup>15</sup> .	Imprisonment for one year, or fine, or both <sup>16</sup> .
Section 298	Uttering any word or making any sound in the hearing, or making any gesture, or placing any object in the sight of any person, with intention to wound his religious feeling. The person cannot be arrested without a warrant <sup>17</sup> .	Imprisonment for a term which may extend to three years but shall not be less than one year, or with fine, or with both <sup>18</sup> .
Section 298-A	Usage of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of holy personages. The person may be arrested without a warrant <sup>19</sup> .	Imprisonment for three years or fine, or both <sup>20</sup> .

6. Pakistan Penal Code 1898, Act XV, s 295.

7. ibid.

8. Pakistan Penal Code 1898, act XV, s 295-A.

9. Pakistan Penal Code 1898, act XV, s 295-B.

10. ibid.

11. Pakistan Penal Code 1898, act XV, s 295-C.

12. ibid.

13. Pakistan Penal Code 1898 Act XV, s 296.

14. ibid.

15. Pakistan Penal Code 1898 Act XV, s 297.

16. ibid.

17. Pakistan Penal Code 1898 Act XV, s 298.

18. ibid.

19. Pakistan Penal Code 1898 Act XV, s 298-A.

20. ibid.

Section 298-B	Misuse of epithets, descriptions and titles, etc., reserved for certain holy personages or places <sup>21</sup> .	Imprisonment for three years, and fine <sup>22</sup> .
Section 298-C	Person of Quadiani group, etc., calling himself a Muslim or preaching or propagating his faith <sup>23</sup> .	Ditto*

### 4.3. Honour Killings

In 2004, Pakistan enacted a law that made honour killings illegal. Honour killings refer to extreme instances of domestic violence, in which women are killed in the name or pretext of honour (Dietrich Oberwittler and Julia Kasselt, 2014). They are often considered a legitimate punishment for having brought shame to a family's reputation and are often condoned by local communities and public officials (Dietrich Oberwittler and Julia Kasselt, 2014). Despite being outlawed, a loophole in the Law allowed alleged perpetrators to be pardoned by the family members of the victims (Lari, 2011). Following outrage after the honour killing of Qandeel Baloch, the government of Pakistan passed a bill that increased prison sentences and outlawed the pardoning of convicted murderers by the relatives of a victim (Al Jazeera, 2016). The so-called Honour Killings Law introduced a number of amendments to the Pakistan Penal Code and the Criminal Code of Procedure (Lari, 2011).

### 4.4. Minority Rights

In the Constitution of Pakistan, several references are made to 'minorities'. However, there is no clear definition for this term, resulting in ambiguity regarding what constitutes a 'minority'. The term 'minority' in the Pakistani context is commonly understood to refer to religious minorities, specifically, the recognised minority groups such as Hindus, Christians and Sikhs. Additionally, this has implications for 'internal minorities' such as Shia, a Muslim minority in Pakistan. The narrow interpretation of 'minorities' to only include religious minorities has been reflected, for example, in Pakistan's engagement with treaty bodies such

21. Pakistan Penal Code 1898 Act XV, s 298-B.

22. *ibid.*

23. Pakistan Penal Code 1898 Act XV, s 298-C

as the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), as well as certain provisions within the Constitution itself that refer to 'minorities'.

The following constitutional provisions mention 'minorities rights' and the freedom of religion or belief granted to them. Article 36, concerning freedom to profess religion and to manage religious institutions. "The state shall safeguard the legitimate rights and interest of minorities, including their due representation in the federal and provincial services". Article 25 (1) (2) (3), that addresses equality of citizens states that "All citizens are equal before the law and entitled to equal protection of the law. There shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex. Nothing in this Article shall prevent the state from making any special provision for the protection of women and children" (ms, n.d.).

Pakistan has signed a number of international treaties that protect minorities and the right to freedom of religion and belief. Pakistan is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 27 of the ICCPR holds that minorities may not be denied the right to live their own culture, speak their language and practise their religion<sup>24</sup>. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is further protected by Article 18 of the ICCPR<sup>25</sup>. Article 24 prohibits discrimination on several grounds, including race, language, religion and national or social origin<sup>26</sup>. In addition, Pakistan has signed the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Nonetheless, these Conventions are often not implemented at the domestic level. Pakistan's legal system is dualist, which means that international conventions do not apply automatically upon ratification but must first be incorporated into domestic law - which Pakistan has frequently failed to do (Minority Rights Group International, 2021).

24. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171 (ICCPR), article 27.

25. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171 (ICCPR), article 18.

26. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171 (ICCPR), article 24.

## Overview of human rights abuses and development

### 5.1. Blasphemy

In February, a Pakistani mob lynched a mentally ill man over blasphemy allegations. The mob lynched Muhammad Mushtaq in a remote region of Pakistan's Punjab province, after he was accused of burning pages of the Quran, the holy book for Muslims. The police detained dozens of people over the lynching, which happened on Saturday 12, February 2022 in the evening, in Khanewal district of Punjab province, according to the Prime Minister's Special Representative on religious harmony, Tahir Ashrafi. The police in Punjab province said that they arrested at least fifteen primary suspects in connection with the case. The killing came just two months after a Sri Lankan factory manager was beaten and set on fire by a mob over allegations of blasphemy in Sialkot city in Punjab province.

The lynching happened after a son of a prayer leader at a local mosque claimed that he spotted someone burning pages of the holy book, according to a police official, Munawar Hussain. The mob gathered at a mosque and tied the man to a tree and beat him with batons, sticks, iron rods and bricks. The man was later identified as Muhammad Mushtaq, who appeared to have mental disabilities. Muhammad's family said he was mentally ill and had not been well for the last 10 to 15 years. These mob killings over blasphemy allegations, a crime that can carry the death sentence, are frequent in Pakistan. Human rights groups have said allegations of blasphemy can often be used to settle personal vendettas, with minorities and mentally ill largely targeted (Aljazeera, 2022).

### 5.2. Violence against Women

Gender-based violence remains a serious problem in Pakistan. The government of Pakistan has in many instances demonstrated that it lacks the ability, or even the will, to tackle this issue (Sukhera, 2021). February was yet another month in which many Pakistani women faced misogyny, domestic abuse, rape, honour killings and murder. This section will summarise some of the most important events related to violence against women and violations of women's rights.

In February, a Pakistani Appeals Court released Muhammed Waseem (Saifi, 2022). Muhammed Waseem had publicly confessed to murdering his 25-year old sister, Qandeel Baloch, on July 16th, 2016 (Saifi, 2022). Qandeel Baloch, whose real name was Fauzia Azeem, was drugged and then strangled to death by her brother (Maher, 2019). She was a social media star that became famous for challenging

what she called the “typical orthodox mindset” of Pakistani people (ABC News, 2022). Shortly after the murder, Waseem posted a video in which he declared that he was proud of killing his sister, because she had brought shame to the family (Perry, 2016). Despite publicly confessing that he had killed his sister, Waseem pleaded not guilty to the charges brought against him (Saifi, 2022). In 2019, Waseem was sentenced to life imprisonment (Saifi, 2022). Only six years later, on February 14th, 2022, Waseem was acquitted (Saifi, 2022). At the time of the murder, a loophole in Pakistani law permitted family members of murder victims to pardon someone convicted of a so-called honour killing (DW, 2022). However, due to enormous public outcry following the honour-killing of Qandeel Baloch, the government of Pakistan passed a law that restricted this controversial practice (DW, 2022). The amendment prohibited an acquittal based solely on a pardon by a family member (Al Jazeera, 2022). However, Pakistani judges are afforded discretion to decide whether a murder is considered an honour killing, hence permitting the accused to claim a different motive (DW, 2022). In the case of Qandeel Baloch, the judge ruled that the murder could not be considered an honour killing (DW, 2022). Despite initially claiming that they would not pardon their son, Baloch's parents reconsidered and decided to pardon their son as well as retracted their earlier statements against him (DW, 2022). The case of Qandeel Baloch is not an isolated incident. Pakistani Human Rights Defenders believe that about 1,000 honour killings are carried out in Pakistan every year, though this figure is likely higher (USA Today, 2022). These women are killed over perceived offences to honour that supposedly contradict conservative views of a woman's place in society, such as having a relationship, eloping, spending time with men outside marriage or wearing particular clothing (Maher, 2022).

On February 24th, 2022, a court in Islamabad sentenced Pakistani-American national Zahir Jaffer to death (Amnesty International, 2022). Jaffer was accused of murdering Noor Mukadam on July 20th, 2021 (Janjua, 2022). Noor Mukadam was held captive, tortured, raped and beheaded after refusing a marriage proposal by Jaffer. Jaffer was consequently arrested and charged with premeditated murder (Janjua, 2022). His parents were arrested for aiding and abetting the murder by trying to conceal evidence, but consequently acquitted by the court (Janjua, 2022). Jaffer's gardener and guard were sentenced to 10 years in prison for abetting the murder, by preventing Mukadam from leaving Jaffer's house (Janjua, 2022). Human rights organisations, including Amnesty International, called the verdict in the case of Jaffer significant but condemned the use of the death penalty (Amnesty International, 2022).

Pakistan has a high rate of violence against women. The Ministry of Human Rights reported that approximately 28% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 had experienced violence, often within their marriage (Saifi, 2022). In 2020, the Human Rights Minister introduced the Domestic Violence Act in the National Assembly, with the aim of creating a system that relieves, rehabilitates and protects women against domestic violence (Ministry of Human Rights, 2020). The Domestic Violence Act defines as “acts of physical, emotional, psychological, sexual and economic abuse committed by a respondent against women (...) that cause fear, physical or psychological harm to the aggrieved person” (Ministry of Human Rights, 2022). It criminalises various acts, including extreme jealousy, humiliation, false allegations, stalking, and harassment (Ministry of Human Rights, 2022). This Act would only apply to Islamabad, but it is believed to set a good example for other provinces (Saifi, 2022). The Act was passed in the lower house of Pakistan's Parliament, but subsequently blocked by the Senate (Saifi, 2022). The Senate referred the Act to the Committee on Human Rights for review and finally adopted it in June, 2021. However, before final approval by the President, the Act was referred to the Council of Islamic Ideology, an all-male constitutional body that is mandated to ascertain whether a certain legislative Act is “repugnant” to Islam (Council of Islamic Ideology). The Council of Islamic Ideology has been accused of holding misogynistic views (Saifi, 2022). In 2016, this Council had proposed a bill that would have allowed men to discipline their wives by “lightly beating” them, such as using a small stick to instil fear (Saifi and Karimi, 2016). In addition, Pakistan's conviction rate for gender-based violence has been staggeringly low. The United Nations Population Fund reported that the conviction rate for violence against women in Pakistan lies between 1-2.5 percent (UNFPA, 2017).

### **5.3. Abuses of Religious and Ethnic Minorities**

The month of February was also marked by abuses of religious and ethnic minorities in Pakistan. In particular, religious minorities, including Hindus, Christians and Shiite Muslims, experienced violent incidents at the local level. They were also confronted by governmental measures that directly or indirectly targeted them in Sunni-majority Pakistan. Unfortunately, governmental measures on the protection of religious and ethnic minorities remained scarce in February.

### 5.3.1. Violence against religious minorities at the community level

The number of murder cases targeting religious minorities was high throughout February. For instance, on February 2nd, 2022, it was reported that a Pakistani Hindu businessman, Satan Lal was murdered due to land disputes by some members of the Dahar community that are predominantly Muslims (The Indian Express, 2022). Before his death, Lal said in a video that became viral: “They are threatening to kill me, smash my eyes and cut my hands and feet. They are asking me to leave Pakistan. I belong to this country and will prefer to die here but will not surrender” (The Indian Express, 2022). This murder had led to massive protests that condemned the killing of Lal in the region. Following the demonstrations, the local police arrested the murderers (Daily Excelsior, 2022).

Another case of violence against religious minorities that hit the headlines in February was the murder of a 25-year-old Christian man, Pervez Masih in Lahore on February 14th, 2022 (Asian News International, 2022; Khokhar, 2022). The incident started with a conflict between Masih and a group of Muslims in his game shop which was pacified with the involvement of other local people (Asian News International, 2022; Khokhar, 2022). However, the next day, Masih was confronted by 150-200 Muslims and was then stabbed to death (Khokhar, 2022). It has often been reported that Christians in Pakistan have become more concerned over their safety than ever before, following the rise in violence against them (Asian News International, 2022). Many of them believe that police do not support the minority groups in the country and that there must be new legislation enforced at the federal level to prevent the violence (Asian News International, 2022).

### 5.3.2. Issues at the governmental level

During February, there were also several issues at the governmental level and debates among religious minorities and human rights activists. For example, throughout the month, human rights activists called the Pakistani government to move the date of a population census from August 2022 to April 2023 to prevent data inaccuracy, like what happened in the 2017 census (Ullah, 2022a). The primary issue in the 2017 census was that religious minorities, particularly Christians, were underrepresented. More specifically, it was noted in the census that the Christian population in Pakistan had decreased by 0.32 percent between 1998 and 2017 (Chaudry, 2022a; Ullah, 2022a). Local Christians, as well as human rights activists, believe that the information does not represent the truth, and therefore, calling for the delay, suggesting early campaigns on registration and other measures in order to acquire as accurate results as possible (Chaudry, 2022a).

Furthermore, on February 7th, 2022, the Supreme Court of Pakistan rejected the petition of a Christian group to give more seats to religious minorities in the national and provincial assemblies, which has been the request of Christians in the country for a long time (Chaudry, 2022b). The Court dismissed the petition on the grounds that increasing minority seats is only possible with a constitutional amendment and that the Court does not have the authority to order the parliament to amend the Constitution (Chaudry, 2022b). In general, minorities in the country assume that the government undercounted them in the 2017 census to allocate fewer seats to them in the assemblies (Chaudry, 2022b).

Moreover, on February 9th, 2022, several policy and education experts, journalists and civil society members gathered in Islamabad to debate how the Single National Curriculum, particularly for grades 6 and 8, does not recognise religious diversity in Pakistan and does not promote inclusivity and cultural harmony in its textbooks (Chaudry, 2022c; Ulah, 2022b). One of the specific points was that while the textbooks did not contain themes on important figures from minorities, instead they presented individuals known for their controversial stances as national heroes (Ulah, 2022b).

During the month of February, there were still several controversial imprisonments and violence over blasphemy in Pakistan. On February 8th, 2022, a Hindu teacher, Notan Lal was sentenced to life imprisonment and faced Rs 50,000 fine over a blasphemy report by his student, Ehtesham Rajput (Soomro, 2022). According to Ehtesham, on September 16th, 2019, Lal made blasphemous statements and insulted Prophet Muhammad when he was studying the subject of Islamiyat in the classroom, after which, he talked to his father about the action of his teacher (OpIndia, 2022; Soomro, 2022). The father, Aziz Rajput, then made a complaint about the teacher to police officers (Soomro, 2022). However, the student, Ehtesham later confessed that he blamed his teacher falsely as he was scolded by him (Soomro, 2022). Despite the confession, the Court still made the aforementioned convictions (OpIndia, 2022; Soomro, 2022). Another case of exceedingly strict convictions over blasphemy was the capital punishment of a minority Shia man, Wasim Abbas by a court in Punjab province on February 23rd, 2022 (Zulqernain, 2022). The conviction was made on the ground that Abbas insulted Prophet Muhammad and dishonoured Islam in June 2020 (The Hindu, 2022; Zulqernain, 2022). Overall, Pakistan is known for its severe blasphemy laws that are against denouncing Islam and usually target religious minorities in the country. It has been reported that there are currently more than 40 individuals that are in life imprisonment or are on death row due to the blasphemy laws (OpIndia, 2022). Yet, there is also an increase in violence and killings over blasphemy among the community

members (Pakistan Today, 2022). Therefore, last month, various religious associations called the government to take more measures to diminish the violence. For instance, on February 23rd, 2022, the Council of Islamic Ideology stated that abusing any individual on account of defaming the Holy Quran or Islam is against the principle of Sharia and requested the government to establish a national commission of sociology experts, psychologists, and lawyers to make proposals on how to avert such incidents (Chaudry, 2022d). Similarly, a group of Church leaders denounced the lack of governmental actions to prevent blasphemy violence and called on the government to take steps beyond mere condemnation statements (Pakistan Today, 2022).

However, the development that led to the most outrage by the local people and human rights activists last month, was the amendment to the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 on February 18th, 2022 (Sherani, 2022). The PECA 2016 was already considered as a draconian law by the public, civil society actors and the media in Pakistan and in other parts of the world, since it was utilised by the government to outlaw the rightful forms of expressions across the country (Geo News, 2022a). Specifically, the law has been a tool for the government to detain journalists and activists on account of their online content critiquing the government. The government also uses the law to bolster the Islamic values across the country (Geo News, 2022a; Sherani, 2022). The government has claimed that the recent amendment is necessary for the sake of national security and prevention of the spread of fake news (Geo News, 2022b). With the amendment, authorities in the country will have further power and rights to prosecute and imprison individuals critical of the government's actions or people who are accused of undermining moral and cultural values in Pakistan (Geo News, 2022b; Sherani, 2022). According to the amendment, the length of the imprisonment of those discontent with the government or its institutions has also been extended from three to five years (The News International, 2022a). Besides, in the amendment, the term "person" also includes not only individuals, but also businesses, companies, and associations (The News International, 2022a). In Pakistan, the amendment has triggered a rage among minorities, journalists, political opponents, civil society, and human rights activists who have condemned it for abridging the freedom of expression, free speech and other basic human rights of citizens and violating the Constitution of Pakistan (Geo News, 2022b; The Express Tribune, 2022a; The News International, 2022b). The top media bodies in Pakistan have stated that it is very disturbing that the government has toughened the existing law instead of revoking it and that they will thus consider all the necessary legal measures to contest the amendment for the sake of retaining media independence (The Express Tribune, 2022a).

## Positive Developments

Nevertheless, there were also some noteworthy positive developments in February. For instance, a special security unit has been established in the province of Sindh in order to protect worship places of minorities across the region, following the recent rise in desecration incidents in Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwaras (Ayub, 2022; Rana, 2022). Lal Chand Malhi, a Member of the National Assembly of the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf Party stated that the units would provide special protection for churches, temples, gurdwaras and other worship places of minority communities in the region (Rana, 2022). This step has received lots of support from the minority communities in the region, since it has been their eagerly-awaited request (Rana, 2022). Another piece of news that led to a positive response particularly among religious minorities in Pakistan in February was the promotion of two Hindu officers to the lieutenant colonel rank, a very high army officer rank (The Express Tribune, 2022b). This promotion was the first in the history of Pakistan, where previously Hindus and other religious minority members were forbidden from joining the army until the year 2000 (Times of India, 2022b).

Furthermore, the Islamabad High Court issued a verdict banning marriage under the age of 18 in all circumstances (Yousafzai, 2022). This verdict was issued during the hearing of the case of Sawera Falak Sher, a 16-year-old girl who was kidnapped and forcibly married (Yousafzai, 2022). The Islamabad High Court has clarified that girls cannot consent to marriage under 18 and they cannot be married off by their parents (Yousafzai, 2022). Child marriage has been a recurring issue in Pakistan, particularly in marginalised communities (Bhatti, 2022). While this issue affects both boys and girls, girls are disproportionately affected (Bhatti, 2022). Sahil, a Pakistani human rights organisation reported that of the 119 cases of child marriage reported in 2020, 95 percent involved girls (Bhatti, 2022). UNICEF reported that 21% of Pakistani girls get married before the age of 18 (Bhatti, 2022).

In February, the transgender community in Pakistan saw many developments. Sara Gill, a transgender woman, became the first Pakistani transgender doctor after receiving her Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery degrees from Jinnah Medical and Dental College in Karachi, an affiliate of Karachi University. She is also a renowned transgender activist in Pakistan. The Karachi Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre (JPMC) offered her a house job as a result of her recent qualifications. It was stated that on the directions of PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah, had instructed the management of Karachi's biggest government-run hospital, to offer employment to Dr.

Sara Gill immediately. She met with JPMC Executive Director, Professor Shahid Rasool, and received her house job offer. On congratulating Dr. Gill on her employment, Chief Minister Shah said in a statement that the PPP government was taking steps for the transgender community in all walks of life. [...] We will ensure dignity and respect for transgender people in all sectors, the statement quoted from the chief minister (Ali, 2022).

Similarly, in February, it was reported Nisha Rao became the first transgender lawyer in Pakistan after she graduated law school in 2022. Additionally, Shyraa Roy became Pakistan's first transgender model and singer to be awarded the Crown Hour Award in the International Beauty Contest (NUT, 2022). It was also reported Pakistan has its first transgender model Kami Sid to rise to prominence in the fashion industry. Kami Sid has proven herself as a transgender fashion model (Times of India, 2022a). These trans-women have become a ray of hope for the oppressed transgender community in Pakistan. The progress of some transgender people in Pakistani society, is demonstrating that the system is improving and moving towards more inclusivity for other gender minorities (Zahid, 2022)

## Conclusion

The report has found that there were lots of cases in which the rights of religious minority groups, women and children were abused and where these groups were ill-treated at the community and governmental level in February, 2022. First of all, there were still a number of hate crimes against religious minority groups in the country. Besides, crimes by local community members and severe convictions over blasphemy allegations were still present during February, which clearly reveal that the government has to take actions in order to avert violent incidents over allegations of blasphemy and has to reconsider its harsh punishments when it comes to that. Additionally, the Pakistani government still ought to rethink its steps when it comes to the PECA amendment, collection of census data, design of its Single National Curriculum and allocation of seats to minorities in the national and provincial assemblies. Furthermore, Honour killings remain a serious issue. Despite taking some steps to implement safeguards, honour killings have continued unabated. To tackle this issue, Pakistan should implement further government safeguards, such as more prosecutions, amending criminal law and facilitating access to shelters and other government services aimed at helping victims (Ijaz, 2019).

Despite all these issues, the report has found that there have been several positive developments in the country throughout February. Several of them have been found in the case of religious minorities, some of whom have been provided with a security unit in the province of Sindh and have been promoted to high army officer ranks. These developments demonstrate that, in some respects, the voices of religious minority groups have been heard and the Pakistani government or its public institutions have tried to take some actions to protect them or provide them with more opportunities. Moreover, in regard to children's, particularly girls' rights, there was also a remarkable step - the Islamabad High Court declared marriages under the age of 18 unlawful. It is uncertain to what extent such marriages will diminish following this law, and yet, it is still a significant long-awaited action by the state. In addition, there were also positive developments when it comes to transgender communities in Pakistan during February. As discussed earlier, many transgender individuals have achieved progress in their society, for instance, by becoming the first transgender lawyer, the first transgender doctor and the first transgender model and singer receiving an award. This indicates that although change is slow, the recognition of the transgender community is growing within the Pakistani society. Yet, Pakistan still has a long way to go when it comes to protecting the human rights of its citizens.

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