

Marginalized Community, Media and Gender Narratives: A Perception Analysis of Women from Religious Minorities*

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Abstract

Popular discourses assume that in Pakistan, about 3.6 per cent of the total 207 million populations are religious minorities but their representation in media is often limited to the episodic coverage of tragic incidents happened to them. A large number of reports have been observed that being a woman in Pakistan is difficult but if someone belongs to a religious minority, it becomes worse but their challenges get almost no media depiction. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to assess the perceptions of minority women about their struggles in Pakistan with almost no representation in media. To understand the perceptions, 20 women were interviewed through snowball sampling from religious minorities. Their responses are analyzed under the light of social responsibility theory. This study also highlights the suggestions of minority women to media organizations to improve their discourse for their community and to understand their views about policy making to strengthen the participatory democracy through a rights-based inclusive media discourse for the unnoticed and the unseen in Pakistan.

Keywords: Media discourse, minorities, perception analysis, women.

Introduction

In the patriarchal society of Pakistan, the gender gap is mounting day by day. Out of the 225.5 million population of Pakistan, the women (49%) and men (51%) ratio are almost equal but the gender gap is growing rapidly. Honor killings, acid attacks, domestic violence, forced marriages, and many other such issues continue to worsen Pakistani women's lives.¹ Pakistan is the second last country in the World

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¹ Mariyam Suleman Anees, 'Honor Killings' Continue Unabated in Pakistan - The Diplomat, 28 July 2022. Accessed on 10 January 2024.

Economic Forum's 2022 Global Gender Gap Report where Pakistan stands at 145 out of 146 states.² Being a woman in Pakistan is difficult but if one belongs to a minority, it becomes worse. It has been observed that Muslim women who are majority in population face similar issues, which are rarely highlighted in mainstream media. On the other hand, issues of the women from minority religions get almost no coverage. Minority women are not only facing patriarchal structure but are also marginalized based on their religious beliefs.³

As per the vision of the founder of Pakistan, Quaid-e-Azam, religious minorities have the freedom to practice their religion and they must not face discrimination at any level in Pakistan. His vision has always been respected by all governments in their respective tenures, as the same vision is also part of the constitution of Pakistan⁴ but it is not practiced to its fullest by any of the government. Pakistan is a multicultural and multiethnic country; the major portion of the country includes the Muslim (96.47%) population whereas only 4% of the population consists of non-Muslims. According to the census 2017, 1.73% of Hindus, 1.27 % of Christians, 0.09% of Ahmadiyya, 0.41% of scheduled caste, and 0.02% of other population exists in Pakistan. The population of the minority is decreasing in Pakistan as it was 23 % when Pakistan got independence but now it is declined to only 4% of the total population. According to the minorities, they are undercounted in the census of 2017. Among some of the major reasons behind the declining minority population is the abduction of non-Muslim women and their forced marriages. Due to this, several Hindu families are migrating to other countries.⁵

<https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/honor-killings-continue-unabated-in-pakistan/>

² Amin Ahmed, 'Pakistan Second-Worst Country on Global Gender Gap Index: WEF Report', Published in *Dawn*, 13 July 2022. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1699399>

³ Juliette Thibaud, 'Pakistan: Religious Minority Women, the Forgotten Victims of a Fragmented Society', *Relief Web*, 3 May 2010, Accessed on 3 June 2024. <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/pakistanreligious-minority-women-forgotten-victims-fragmented-society>

⁴ Javaid-ur-Rahman, 'Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Religious Minorities of Pakistan', *The Nation*, 14 August 2021. Accessed on 3 June 2024. <https://www.nation.com.pk/14-Aug-2021/quaid-e-azam-muhammad-ali-jinnah-and-religious-minorities-of-pakistan>.

⁵ Nafisa Hoodbhoy, 'Pakistan's Religious Minorities Say They Were Undercounted in Census', *Voice of America*, 1 July 2021. Accessed on 3

Almost 20 to 25 minority girls are abducted every month which are later forced into marrying random Muslim men. This situation gets worse when their families try to take legal help but they are not facilitated by the law forces. One such instance includes the case of Huma Younus, a Christian girl, who is only 14 years old when she reported missing from her house, forcibly married to a Muslim man. The family approached the law but the court decided to hand over the girl to her abductor as according to Islam she reached to her puberty. Many girls from minorities who are vulnerable due to economic and societal deprivation are trapped by Muslim men and forcibly converted to the majority religion which is wrong not only on moral grounds but also prohibited in Islam.⁶

In addition to that, females from minorities also face discrimination in educational institutions and workplaces. In these places, they have to face the negative attitude from the people of the majority religion in Pakistan. They are ridiculed for their religious point of view. They have to put double efforts to prove their worth and they feel more stress because any action can make them a victim of the blasphemy law.⁷ In comparison with big cities like Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad, minority women from towns, villages, and small cities are more suppressed. Women from minorities are considered untouchable. They are not allowed to eat with Muslims in their workplace or educational institutions. They are bullied. In nutshell women from minorities are facing several problems in Pakistan.

Minorities play an important role in development of a country. So discrimination against minorities should be addressed by the government and general public. The public is informed about such incidents by the media, and the media is a force that can build pressure on the government by highlighting the incidents against minorities. After the privatization of Pakistan media, several channels are operating in

June 2024. <https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch-pakistans-religious-minorities-say-they-were-undercountedcensus/6207724.html>

⁶ Ewelina U. Ochab, 'The Disappearing Religious Minority Women and Girls in Pakistan', *Forbes*, 27 September 2020. Accessed on 3 June 2024. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2020/09/27/the-disappearing-religious-minority-women-and-girls-in-pakistan/?sh=1eff2c9c20f2>.

⁷ Mary James Gill, Asif Aqeel, and Basil Dogra, 'Stories of Resilience and Resolve: An Intersectional Study on the Plight of Non-Muslim Women and Girls in Pakistan', *Centre for Law and Justice*, January 2022. Accessed on 3 June 2024. https://thesouth.asiacollective.org/wpcontent/uploads/2022/08/ResearchPaper_MinorityWomen_Pakistan.pdf

Pakistan. Since then, people have relied primarily on the media to learn about their surroundings. People's reliance on the media to obtain news increased as a result of this transformation. Although social media is also providing a platform where information can be obtained but still mostly people rely on electronic media for authentic information in Pakistan. Electronic media can prove as a bridge between the minority and the majority in population but Pakistan media is not working to its potential. News media is not highlighting brutal incidents against minorities and even in the entertainment industry minorities are misrepresented in their content.

Media in Pakistan has always been debatable for the stereotypical depiction of non-Muslim religious minorities. It has been criticized that the struggles, issues, and stories of religious minorities are untold and unheard and are the most neglected areas in Pakistani media. Therefore, the in-depth interviews from minority women were conducted to understand their perspectives regarding marginalized coverage of minorities in media in this project. This study focuses upon following perspectives:

1. Minority perspectives – how the voices of religious minorities in Pakistani media are missing from the national media discourse.
2. Media perspectives – how media language could become public interest journalism.
3. Policy perspectives – whether parliament, government, and civil society could strengthen participatory democracy through a rights-based, inclusive media discourse for the unheard and the unseen.

All these perspectives were examined through the perceptions and views of women from religious minorities in Pakistan.

Literature Review

This research aims at understanding the issues of females from religious minorities and analyzing their perception about the marginalized and gender stereotypical depiction of minorities in media. Only a few scholars analyzed the issues faced by women from minorities in Pakistan. The situation faced by poor Christian women and girls in Pakistan has also been studied which concluded that religious discrimination and sexual harassment are the major threat to minority women as they not only limit their mobility but also make an impact on their choices. Forced conversion, workplace discrimination, name-

calling, rude behavior, and minimum law protection are making their lives difficult in Pakistan.⁸

Many studies exist in academia that discuss the overall problems and issues of minorities in Pakistan.⁹ Minorities in Pakistan are facing many problems which include marginalized media coverage, fewer educational and employment opportunities, religious freedom, social recognition, and biased legislation.¹⁰ Apart from that minorities are also facing challenges of sexual assault,¹¹ violence, stress, and murder threats.¹²

In addition to pinpointing the issues of minorities in Pakistan, the researchers also examined the role of media in highlighting minorities' problems. In addition to that there was a study conducted to investigate the role of private TV channels in Pakistan in highlighting minority issues and creating harmony among minorities and Muslims. It was concluded that although Private TV channels are successful in highlighting minorities' issues but they are not making significant efforts to create harmony among different groups. Its findings concluded that due to economic interests, and religious and social pressure *Geo News* is giving very little coverage to minority issues and that too in a highly biased way.¹³

Some of the scholars also studied the perspective of the media regarding the coverage of minorities' issues. As it was examined the perspectives of the media persons and electronic regulatory authority on

⁸ Naumana Suleman, 'A Case of Several Jeopardies: A Study on the Intersecting Inequalities in the Everyday Lives of Poor Minority Christian Women and Girls in Pakistan', *Creid Intersections Series Religious Inequalities and Gender*, December 2020. Accessed 8 June, 2024 <https://doi.org/10.19088/CREID.2020.007>

⁹ Ali Raza Shah, and Bela Nawaz, 'Issues and State of Religious Minorities in Pakistan: A Systematic Literature Review', *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 5:3(2021), 72.

¹⁰ Akhlaq Ahmad, Bilal Shaukat & Muhammad Saeed, 'A Survey of Social Exclusion, Media Portrayal, and Services for Christians Minorities in Pakistan', *Pakistan Journal of Peace and Conflict Studies*, 1:2 (2016), 23.

¹¹ Hume Tahir, and Iffat Tahira, 'Freedom of Religion and Status of Religious Minorities in Pakistan', *International Journal of Management Sciences and Business Research*, 5:12 (2016), 36.

¹² Muhammad Riaz, and Muhammad Khan, 'Structural Violence and Christian Minority in Pakistan: The Monolithic Image to Be Blamed', *Dialogue (Pakistan)*, 10:4 (2015), 347.

¹³ Amber, Mubeen, and Rabia Qusien, 'Minorities in Pakistan: Role of Pakistan Private TV Channels in Highlighting Minorities Rights', *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 7:2 (2017), 110.

coverage of issues faced by the Christians in Punjab. The study concluded that the media of Pakistan is not covering Christian issues according to their written policy approved by PEMRA. Pakistan's electronic media channels avoid covering issues that induce fear among people.¹⁴

Contrary to the traditional media, social media is providing a platform for minorities to express their problems and issues freely. Social media is creating awareness about minorities' issues and also helps them in finding the solution to their problems.¹⁵ According to some scholars, social media is also inducing hatred among the religious majority and minority in population. Social media in Pakistan is becoming a major tool for religious intolerance in Pakistan.¹⁶

As evident from the review of the literature that there are a very few studies conducted related to women and girls of minorities especially in Pakistan. The detailed perception of minority women in Pakistan is missing in the literature. Therefore, in this research, the issues of minority women were analyzed in their perspective that must be addressed by the media in Pakistan. Unlike the above studies, this research would not be focusing on a specific minority but the sample of this study included all the religious minorities that exist in Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

This paper focused on issues and stereotypical depictions of women from minorities in Pakistani media narrated and described by themselves. From the above literature, it is evident that women from minorities are facing discrimination at every level in Pakistan. These women are struggling to get their basic rights in Pakistan and media neglecting their issues at large. Therefore, this study also comes under the umbrella of the Social Responsibility Theory where media is responsible for the fair,

¹⁴ Rachel Aruna Joshua, and Anjum Zia, 'Exploring the Policies for Coverage of Minorities' Issues in Pakistani', *Global Social Sciences Review*, 5:2 (2020), 112. [https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2020\(v-ii\).10](https://doi.org/10.31703/gssr.2020(v-ii).10)

¹⁵ Sumera Batool, Saba Sultana, and Sana Tariq, 'Social Media and Religious Minorities: Analyzing the Usage of Facebook Groups among Christian Minority to Highlight Their Issues in Pakistan', *Global Mass Communication Studies Review*, 6:1 (2021), 123. [https://doi.org/10.31703/gmcr.2021\(VI-I\).10](https://doi.org/10.31703/gmcr.2021(VI-I).10)

¹⁶ Jahanzeb Haque, 'Hate Speech: A Study of Pakistan's Cyber', *Islamabad: Bytes for All*, 2014. Retrieved from: https://www.academia.edu/9731744/Hate_Speech_A_study_of_Pakistans_cyberspace
<https://bytesforall.pk/publication/hate-speech-study-pakistans-cyberspace>

balanced and equal representation of women from minorities. This study further stands on the notion that if media represent minorities issues in a balanced and positive light then the people from the majority beliefs can understand the problems of the marginalized communities and also raise their voices to eradicate discrimination against minorities. However, this study does not focus upon the factors that influence media to neglect the issue of minority women. The scope of this paper is only to understand the perceptions of minority women about their issues in Pakistan and how they think their lives can be improved with the balanced approach in media and policy makers in Pakistan.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the research are, firstly, to examine the perceptions of women from religious minorities regarding the representation of their problems, struggles and discrimination issues in Pakistani media. Secondly, to highlight the suggestions of women from religious minorities to media organizations to improve their media discourse regarding their community. Thirdly, to understand the views of women from religious minorities regarding policy making to strengthen the participatory democracy through a rights-based inclusive media discourse for the unheard and the unseen in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. What are perceptions of women from religious minorities regarding the representation of their problems, struggles and discrimination in Pakistani media?
2. What are the suggestions of women from religious minorities to media organizations to improve their media discourse regarding their community?
3. How do women from religious minorities view the role of policy making to strengthen the participatory democracy through a rights-based inclusive media discourse in Pakistan?

Research Methodology

It is a descriptive research following qualitative approach to explore the issues of women from religious minorities with the semi-structured in-depth interviews. To understand the narratives of women from religious minorities, 20 women were interviewed. Snowball sampling technique was used because of the willingness of participants to respond.

The inclusion and exclusion criteria and the recruitment of these 20 women by keeping all ethical considerations, are also further classified on the following basis:

1. Out of 20, 10 were working women and 10 were non-working women from religious minorities to see that how their perceptions vary.
2. They were also being further classified on the basis of their education. Out of 10 in each set of women, 5 were selected who have minimum graduation level of education and 5 were less or uneducated.
3. They were selected randomly with only two criteria of working and non-working and educated and uneducated. They were not classified on the basis of their religious beliefs and age.
4. This study focuses only on the perceptions and personal narratives of minority women regarding media representations. It does not include the media professionals to know their restrictions or limitations to highlight their problems of Pakistani media.
5. The participants were recommended by the friends in Lahore where the researcher developed the rapport to talk about their issues, challenges and struggles of living together or separately. The anonymity was kept assured.
6. In addition to all mentioned above, the participants were also informed that they were free to opt in or out of the study at any point in time. The objectives, motives, funding and benefits behind the study were also well communicated before they showed their interest and gave their consent to participate in the research.

A semi-structured questionnaire was constructed to break the ice. Interviews were conducted as per the convenience of the respondents at their proposed places to make them feel comfortable. Their identity is not disclosed to make them feel secure and comfortable. Each interview was of 45-60 minutes. The data was analyzed by using the descriptive approach of thematic analysis. The themes were extracted from the data by adopting the following steps:

1. The interviews, type field notes and utterances were transcribed.
2. All the statements were arranged and sorted. The common patterns of participants' thoughts and responses were found into the different themes. These themes were coded and categorized through NVivo respectively.

For ensuring the validity of the research the following steps were followed:

1. The members' check technique was employed by articulating and summarizing participants' statements during the interviews.
2. Through member check, the experiences and personal biases of the researcher were bracketed to make the findings more valid.
3. The follow-up meetings, telephone and email communications with respondents were also organized to endorse meanings of their perceptions and to make sure that the researcher was not dominant on the interpretation of the statements rather the respondents were active.

Findings & Discussion

All the selected women from the minority religions expressed their dissatisfaction with the media discourse about their problems and struggles that they have been facing being in Pakistan. Their life struggles and problems are almost overlooked by the mainstream media at large. Some large minority communities like Hindus and Christians get coverage episodically during any controversy, incident or well-known festivals but comparatively the smaller minority communities like Parsees and Baha'is are almost neglected by all mainstream media of Pakistan. There are numerous issues that have been highlighted by the women during the interviews for this paper. The following themes are emerged through their responses which are discussed in this report anonymously as per the preference and consent of the respondents.

Problems, Struggles and Discrimination Issues in Pakistani Media: Perceptions of Women from Minority Religions

At large, the problems and struggles of women from minority religions in Pakistan have been associated with the acceptance of co-existence and tolerance of difference in faith, beliefs, practices and opinions among communities which lead to the overall neglected national narrative related to minority religions that is visible in media discourse also. The selected respondents identified the following problems and their life struggles while being in Pakistan:

1. Ignored Identity

It was observed that most of the respondents believe that people from religious minorities do not exist for Muslim majority population in Pakistan and the reason is almost the absence of depiction of their lives on Pakistan mainstream media. One of the Hindu respondents added that

The most important challenge is that people in Punjab are not very familiar with Hindus. They get extremely surprised when they find out that someone is a Hindu. On the other

hand, being a Christian in Pakistan is now more normalized due to the significant Christian population. However, when they come across a Hindu, they look at them with surprised eyes as they can't believe there are Hindus living in Pakistan.

One of the respondents added that 'in the media, I have no experience, but in schools and colleges, I was told that since I am a Hindu, I should live in India'. It is really important for the media to amplify the adversities faced by women from religious minorities and highlight their stories but for that the existence of people especially women from minority religions must be recognized in Pakistan. For instance, one of the Christian Respondents stated that

By minority, I don't mean just Christians, but also all other minorities living in Pakistan. All these groups should receive equal amplification and sufficient media coverage to shed light on their issues.

Christian respondents also discussed the 'a pejorative term' of '*Chuhri*' (low caste) given to Christian women in Pakistan which refers to their past as members of the subcontinent's Hindu '*Chuhra* caste' that is historically linked with the sweeping profession. Though they were converted to Islam and Christianity but they continue to suffer the same treatment at the hands of their co-religionists and are given jobs seen as humiliating and degrading. Now 80% Christians are considered to work as maids, sanitary workers and the ones who can do any dirty work for Muslims. Most of the Christians in Pakistan are dark in complexion that is also stereotyped as someone sub-ordinate. One of the respondents added that:

Muslim women hire Christian Chuhri as their house maids who clean their houses, wash their cloths and utensils but they consider them so dirty and untouchable that they are called choori and they keep their utensils separate to eat.

Another critical issue was also discussed by all the minority Christian respondents regarding the job opportunities in public offices. Government departments recently advertised posts of sanitary workers in Pakistan and only non-Muslims especially Christians women were encouraged to apply. This advertisement and job opportunity were highly criticized by the minority activists but neither media nor policy makers condemned or expressed any kind of disapproval of this discrimination for Christian minority women. According to respondents, such national discourse leads them to identity crisis in Pakistan.

2. Victim Blaming & Blasphemy Attacks

Most of the respondents believe that even if minority women get representation in the media, they still face discrimination there. Apart from the media, when they get representation elsewhere, they are often biased against due to their faith. Moreover, if any controversy arises involving these women, they tend to silence themselves because they are afraid of being blamed at the end. They hesitate to speak up for themselves. One of the Christian respondent said that ‘most of the time, conflicts are reported among belief systems. If you see mostly, blasphemy cases filed against Hindus, Ahmadis and Christian are commonly reported’. Another respondent further added:

I don't say that Muslims do not support us but if they try to support, they also get victimized. Have you forgotten the case of Governor of Punjab Salman Taseer who was assassinated in 2011? There are many others who have been quite vocal in their support for religious minorities but the problem is the mindset of victim blaming.

It has been viewed that Muslims and religious minorities do co-exist pleasantly enough without frequent outbreaks of hostility in Pakistan but accusations of blasphemy have also often led to mob violence against religious minorities where women from marginalized communities on the basis of religious beliefs are also being targeted. Almost all respondents highlighted the case of Asia Bibi and the irresponsible coverage of media in Pakistan about her release and departure for asylum. One of the Christian respondents argued:

We cannot forget the case of Rimsha Masih who became the first non-Muslim proved to be innocent in a blasphemy case when it was exposed by the court that she had been framed by a local Muslim cleric in 2012. We also cannot forget the exemplary case of Asia Bibi who in 2010 got into an dispute with some Muslim women in her village while harvesting barriers and was later accused by them of having blasphemed.

Moreover, she added that:

Blasphemy has often been used against us for settling old score. What happened after her (Asia Bibi) acquittal, religious extremists blocked the roads, damaged the properties and protested against justice system? Asia was departed for Canada for asylum in 2019. Struggling for 9 years for her life, murdering of Salman Taseer, and so many

other women who have been suffered from the unfair justice system, who is responsible?

The fear of blasphemy and victim blaming are two crucial issues that have been quoted by almost all selected minority women but their major concern is that media does not raise voice or cover their issues in an unbiased way. They feel as media is also under pressure by religious powers that dump their genuine and critical issues in Pakistan. The absence of their voice in media make them feel more insecure and unsafe in the country where they are born and have their houses.

3. Forced Conversion & Marriages of Minority Women

Almost all the respondents highlighted the serious issues of forced conversions and marriages of young girls and women from religious minorities in Pakistan and the complaints of victims are never taken seriously by the police and other law enforcing forces. They either refuse to register the report or label the abduction, conversion and forced marriage as 'love marriage'. These issues have never been portrayed neither in news reports nor in drama or entertainment industry. As one of the respondents argued:

I was deeply disturbed to know that girls under the age of 13 are being abducted from their families, trafficked to unknown locations, forced them to marry men sometimes twice their age, and pressurized to convert to Islam. This all is the clear violation of international human rights law but media takes no interest to highlight this issue.

It was further argued by another respondent that:

Kidnappers force the minority women to sign the documents to show their false age and legal consent to marry to Muslim men. So when police register the report against abductors, they use these false documents to prove them innocent.

Respondents not only expressed their concerns on the role of police but they also raised questions on the integrity of Muslim clerics who perform the marriage. This is their duty to investigate the age of the girl and willingness to convert the religion but they do not intend to do so. One of the respondents quoted a case of a girl who was just 12 years old named A (fake name) got disappeared and after two days, police recovered her and reported that she has embraced Islam and got married with a 41 years old man. Her marriage also proved that she was 18 years old adult. So no crime had been committed in the documents. In this case, the role of Muslim cleric is also questionable.

By narrating the reason of the conversion and forced marriages, most of the respondents from religious minorities added that to convert

someone from their religion to Islam for Muslim clerics in Pakistan is perceived 'as a virtuous and pious deed that will bring rewards in this world and after this world in heavens', no matter which method is used to execute the conversion or marriage.

In addition, the trauma and loss for families and the minority victims are also one of the most neglected issues in Pakistan. Respondents also highlighted the compromised psychological health including emotional breakdown, extreme anxiety, self-harm and depression among minority women due to their forced conversion and marriages. They raised the question that 'can you name any program, show or a drama that was made on their miserable psychological and physical health?' It was further asked that 'is their psychological and physical health less important than women from majority in population?'

4. Stereotyping the Women from Minority Religion

It was found from the responses of the respondents that women from other religions also have to face issues to fulfil their everyday rituals and norms because there is no depiction on media that minority women do have their own life styles as per their religious faith. For example, one of the respondents added that:

If a Hindu married woman wears Sindoor (vermilion) and Mangal-sootar (sacred necklace), she is often looked at with strange eyes. Similarly, if a woman dresses according to her religion, such as dressing like a Hindu, she is labeled as belonging to India, and people are reluctant to raise their voices for her.

Respondents believed that their religious social norms are marginalized which make them vulnerable to harassment. This is not limited to Hindu culture only, even Christians feel odd for their social norms and their practices.

Suggestions to Improve National Discourse for Religious Marginalized Women through Media

Respondents were asked their suggestions about how media can improve the national discourse for minority women. Their suggestions are thematically described in the following:

1. It is very significant to raise public awareness through the inclusion of marginalized community in news and entertainment of Pakistani media. So that the issue of 'identity crisis' or 'ignored identity' would be addressed. As one of the respondents suggested that the media should play a crucial role in educating the public about the inclusion of Hindu people in the society. The media has a

responsibility to convey the message that a Hindu minority female living in Pakistan should be considered a Pakistani first and then Hindu second. Her primary identity should be as a Pakistani, and she should enjoy all the participatory democratic rights to voice her personal and societal issues. Media representation about marginalized would enable them to get recognition in the community and hence it would have a positive impact on the society. Similarly, another respondent added that 'the representation of marginalized women in media discourse must not be only about them but for them and by them.' The excessive penetration of women from religious minorities would lead to tolerance towards them and would also pave the way for people to get exposed to the unheard role of minority women in the development of Pakistan.

2. Media should promote interface between women representatives of religious minorities and media to improve mutual understanding and to control their stereotyping. For this, media houses should also hire minority women so they can work for their communities. When women issues are being highlighted in media talks shows, minority women must be the part of the panel. Respondents raised questions on the biases of the media houses to depict the minority issues by the people who are majority in population. This can be addressed to some extent if they would be encouraged to be the part of media. One of the Hindu respondents added that the media can play a significant role in normalizing people's perception about the Hindu religious minority by dedicating a half-hour time slot every week exclusively to discussing the issues and challenges faced by Hindu women. During this time, they should invite not the wives of elite religious scholars, but rather the underprivileged lower middle-class females belonging to the Hindu community. This approach will bring attention to the real struggles and concerns of the Hindu religious minority and create a more inclusive narrative on media platforms.
3. It is the responsibility of the socially responsible media to sensitize society on religious pluralisms in Pakistan and more nuanced coverage of religious minorities. This is one of the most convenient ways to normalize cultural beliefs, social norms and values, customary practices of minority women and to make them comfortable in the society. For this, only news coverage is not enough, rather entertainment industry must extend the cooperation to highlight their lives.
4. The role of mainstream media in the abduction of minority women, their forced conversion and marriages is questionable. They expressed a little trust on social media where they can raise their

voices and people do support them on humanitarian grounds but their demand from media is to raise voice for them to protect their lives from religious extremist authorities, poor justice system and unfair domestic legislations. One of the respondents suggested that ‘entertainment industry in Pakistan is depicting women issues in Pakistan but why dramas and films cannot represent forced marriages and conversion of the minority women? Is it because a religiously sensitive topic? But aren’t we Pakistanis?’ Respondents also demanded media to highlight the trauma, emotional breakdown and physical violence on women from minority religions due to their forced conversions and marriages.

5. Respondents emphasized that media is the watch dog of the society. So if policy makers do not design any mechanism to protect their basic rights, it is the responsibility of media to criticize the policy makers as media does for Muslim women when they face any suppression or oppression at their homes and workplaces.

Suggestions to Improve National Discourse for Religious Marginalized Women through Policy Making

Respondents were asked their suggestions about how policy makers can improve the national discourse for minority women while designing a policy to protect them. Their suggestions are thematically described in the following:

1. Respondents reinforce their views about Pakistan’s legal system by adding that the laws for the minority protection and empowerment in Pakistan legal system do not address the issues of minority women specifically. Though they have few provisions in the legislation that protect minority women from acid attacks, customary social practices, forced marriages, sexual assaults, cyber harassment, child marriages and workplace harassment, etc. Similarly, a National Commission for Minorities and a Provincial Minorities Affairs and Human Rights Punjab department also work towards for religious minorities to achieve tolerance, coexistence and interfaith harmony. There are also laws and government departments exclusive to the provincial assembly and its legislation that pursue to guard and empower minority women in many different sides. Despite sufficient constitutional provisions, departments and laws, there is a noteworthy failure in executing these provisions due to inadequacies on the part of the Pakistani judicial system and managerial bodies. Though the justice system of Pakistan is pluralistic and comprises of many informal bodies including the Jirga system, which involves tribal courts prevalent in rural areas, and the Islamic Sharia courts

but these alternate judicial systems are primarily administered by influential people and conventional cultural norms that perform crimes and violent vengeance against minority women, such as blasphemy, forced marriages, honor killings, acid attacks, and abduction for forced conversion. The respondents from minority religions also emphasize the need of the strong, fair and impartial justice and legal system in Pakistan which makes sure to strengthen for the protection of their rights and safety. They also demanded the policy makers and government to design a mechanism that can stop misuse of Blasphemy law against them for their personal enmities and prejudice.

2. The government must take serious steps to stop forced conversions and marriages in the line of international human rights and legislations. Pakistan's police and courts have to stop enabling the perpetrators by accepting 'fake and fraudulent evidence' specifically regarding the age of the minority women and their false consent to convert to Islam and marry with a Muslim man. One of the respondent added that 'the police, the courts and the Muslim clerics must not misuse interpretations of religious law' to defend the perpetrators and justify the victims remaining with their abusers by refusing to register the abductions, or discharging them as 'love marriages'. Only policymakers can design device to protect minority women in Pakistan.
3. Policy makers should constitute bodies for training media practitioners with religious minorities backgrounds on professional approaches to a rights-based civic activism, so that the religions minorities are seen and heard more. Policy makers should make sure that women must take part in such bodies and activities.
4. In order to promote understanding and acceptance, the curriculum in Pakistani academia should include multicultural chapters that educate the Pakistani population about the normalcy and diversity of the different religious communities. It is essential for policy makers to implement the curriculum that must be unbiased and provide an accurate portrayal of different religious minorities. This will resolve the identity crisis of religious minorities. One of the Hindu respondents argued that the policy makers must change the curriculum to promote harmony among different religions. In the past, when studying Pakistan Studies, it felt more like they were studying Islamic Studies rather than understanding the Hindu issues and cultural values. This skewed representation painted the Hindu community as villains during the migration and separation of India and Pakistan. They need to revamp the curriculum to promote

tolerance and empathy among the public towards religious minorities. This can be achieved by adding chapters about multiculturalism and introducing a course on ethics from an early age. The purpose of this course is to teach children to be tolerant towards people who are different from them and to respect individuals regardless of their gender, race, creed, or religion. The curriculum should promote humanity among people and encourage them to treat each other on a human level.

5. The job opportunities must be open for all the minority women in public offices equally. Jobs like sanitary workers must not be only specific to any minority community which is a clear discrimination from government and policy makers. As it was stated in a study that ‘80 percent of sanitation workers in Pakistan are Christians despite them making up 2 percent of the general population. Most of 9,000 employees of Lahore Waste Management Company are Christians. Similarly, 1,600 employees of the Water and Sanitation Agency are Christians’.¹⁷ One of the Christian respondent added that ‘it is extremely heart-wrenching for us and the government must end this practice now. We have contributed greatly in education, health, defense and many other sectors but labeling us only for sanitation work is quite disheartening for all of us’. She further added that ‘in 2015, Former Chief Minister of Punjab Shehbaz Sharif issued a notification to exclude the controversial clause regarding non-Muslim sweepers from Punjab service rules but there is not intent to do so.’ Now government and policy makers must ban derogatory advertisements for religious minorities as per the Constitution of Pakistan that assured equal rights to all citizens regardless of their religion, caste, and creed.

Conclusion

As the media serves as the watchdog of the society, it has become vital, especially for Generation Z to utilize it for sharing and spreading all kinds of information. This includes concerns related to minorities, both in general and specifically for women in Pakistan. The increasing divide

¹⁷ Abdullah Zafar, ‘Pakistani Christians irked by repeated discriminatory ads for sanitary posts’, *Kross Konnection*, 12 February 2022. Retrieved from: <https://krosskonnection.pk/2022/02/pakistani-christians-irked-by-repeated-discriminatory-ads-for-sanitary-posts/>

between minority and majority communities on the basis of religious faith is fueled by animosity, hate and prejudice. However, the media can play a constructive role in bridging the gap by highlighting the issues faced by minority women and ensuring that the majority in population does not hold stereotypical views about them in Pakistan. Therefore, this paper under the light of social responsibility theory, added that minority women do have equal human rights to live in Pakistan. Government and policy makers must keep a check on their well-being and media must highlight their struggles, issues and problems that they have been facing on the basis of their religious faiths. Inter-faith harmony, co-existence, patience and tolerance among different religious faiths can only be achieved in a society where the divide between majority and minority in population is reduced with the help of media and policy makers.