

Assisting underage victims of anti-Christian attitudes in Pakistan

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Abstract

Pakistan has a long history of persecuting minority faith groups. It ranked seventh on the 2024 Open Doors World Watch List, and the 2024 Annual Report published by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom recommended designating Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern due to its worsening religious freedom conditions for Christians and other religious minorities. The persecution affects all age groups. However, this paper focuses on Christian children, portraying the persecution of minors as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that affects their whole life, impeding their religious, educational, and professional development. Selected persecution cases are provided as illustrations, accompanied by the description of corresponding aid projects by Voice of the Martyrs Poland, launched to assist Pakistani minors and their families.

Keywords

Persecution, minors, anti-Christian, pressure points.

1. Introduction

A silent epidemic of kidnappings, forced marriages, and forced conversions of Christian girls and women continues in Pakistan. Although persecution affects both boys and girls, it proceeds differently with the two genders. For underage girls, it involves the risk of abduction, followed by rape, forced conversion to Islam, and forced marriage. Of 52 instances of religious persecution in Pakistan documented by International Christian Concern (ICC) in the first and second quarters of 2021, 18 involved violence against minors (kidnapping followed by forced conversion and/or marriage). In one case, the victim was only 8 years old (ICC 2021b:4). Annually, from 100 to 700 Christian girls per year are abducted,

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forcibly converted, and married to Muslim abductors or rapists, published records show (Movement for Solidarity and Peace 2014:2).

Even when reported, the cases are rarely adequately investigated, and perpetrators are seldom charged. Law enforcement is indolent in the process or even perpetuates the violence, as was the case with a Christian girl tortured and sexually harassed by a police officer in front of her father.

Abductions decisively terminate the educational process of young girls. The fear of being abducted may result in their confinement to the home and deprivation of regular education. Other impediments Christians face in the state schooling system include unaffordable school fees and compulsory religious education that does not conform to their convictions. Due to their underprivileged status as second-class citizens, Christians can rarely afford the school fees. Moreover, the core curriculum includes religious education, basically Islamic studies. Even if Christian children complete formal education, their job prospects are dim. They are typically offered menial jobs, such as sanitation work. Those who succeed in their professional career may lose their position on religious grounds.

This paper presents the persecution of Christian children in Pakistan as a multi-dimensional phenomenon that affects their whole lives, impeding their religious, educational, and professional development. Selected persecution cases are provided as illustrations, accompanied by the description of corresponding aid projects by Voice of the Martyrs Poland (VOM Poland), launched to assist Pakistani minors and their families.

2. Overview of Pakistan

The 2024 Annual Report published by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF 2024:40) once again recommended designating Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern due to its worsening religious freedom conditions for Christians and other religious minorities. “In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Pakistan continued to deteriorate. Religious minorities were targeted for their beliefs, including accusations of blasphemy, and were subject to mob violence, lynchings, and forced conversions,” the authors stated (USCIRF 2024:40).

2.1. Pressure points

In their 2021 report *Children and Youth Specific Religious Persecution 2021: Preliminary Findings from 50 Countries*, Open Doors introduced the concepts of *pressure points*, *gateways*, and *pathways* to trace trends in the persecution of minors. Pressure points refer to “both the pressures and violence faced in the course of religious persecution” (Morley et al. 2021:3). The report also examines gateways,

or opportunities to benefit from religious education, and pathways, defined as opportunities related to future professional careers and family roles (Morley et al. 2021:3).

The following pressure points have been identified concerning religious persecution specific to children and youth: discrimination/harassment via education; denied access to a Christian parent; violence – verbal (including harassment and insults); forced marriage + violence – sexual; violence – physical (including torture); denied legal identity as a Christian; violence – psychological; and abduction. To a varying degree, all these pressure points are a part of the everyday experience of Christian children and youth in Pakistan. Below, I will analyze these points in more detail. Since, as the report authors claim, “education is a key opportunity for persecution” (Morley et al. 2021:3), it will be the first area discussed.

2.2. Anti-Christian attitudes in the system of education

The intersection between the right to education and the right to freedom of religion and belief (FoRB) has gained the attention of international human rights bodies. This discourse has resulted in a number of legal provisions that address both the right of every person to education regardless of their religion² and the rights of parents and legal guardians to educate their children in conformity with their convictions.³ Despite the adoption of solid legal guarantees, Christian students in restricted nations continue to face persecution in the form of denial of education and discriminatory treatment in the system of education based on religion or belief.

Pakistan is no different in this respect. The country’s constitution guarantees accessibility to free education at an elementary level (ages 5-16) (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:60), the promotion of free secondary education for all, and more accessible higher education for backward classes and areas in particular (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:58), regardless of students’ religion. It also ensures non-discriminatory treatment of religious minorities in access to public spaces and services. Students are thus constitutionally protected from the requirement to participate in religious instruction, ceremonies, or worship other than their own (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:59).

Officially, state educational services are free, access to educational institutions is provided for all religious traditions, and students are not expelled for their

2 This is done through the provision of compulsory and free primary education, available and accessible secondary education in diverse forms, and higher education that is equally accessible to all (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:10). See the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Art. 187; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Art. 13 (2); and the Convention against Discrimination in Education adopted at the General Conference of UNESCO, Articles 1, 14(1), and 28(1).

3 UDHR, Art. 26; ICCPR, Art. 18 (4); ICESCR Art. 13(3).

religious beliefs. However, the experience of children with non-Muslim backgrounds, including Christians, proves the contrary.

First, the number of schools is insufficient to cater to the student population's needs, and those in operation, even state schools, require a monthly fee. Christians can rarely afford school fees since they are systemically marginalized and pauperized in all aspects of life. They struggle with unemployment, discrimination in job recruitment and selection, and exclusion from the corporate sector. Their job opportunities are restricted to temporary, poorly paid, and unskilled jobs. Business and trade, sectors that could generate higher income, are inaccessible to impoverished Christian minorities due to their inability to accumulate sufficient capital for investment. Should they attempt to form trade and business partnerships, they face rejection and ostracism for faith reasons. Likely consequences include lack of access to loans, subsidies, or government contracts, along with client boycotts (Alam 2021:43; World Watch Research 2024:43).

In extreme situations, unplanned expenses that stretch their limited budget, such as medical costs, lead to incurring debts and eventually forced labor in brick kilns. The children (not just the adults) are forced into working there and thus cannot attend school. Forms of religious persecution such as the imprisonment or death of a parent or the lack of employment opportunities following extremist violence, such as the 2023 Jaranwala riots, are other circumstances that make educational services unavailable or unaffordable.

Even if children of low-income Christian families attend free public schools, they often receive substandard education due to scarcity or lack of facilities, teachers, and learning materials (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:60). As reported by the US State Department, further college and university education is restricted for Christian students, thus depriving them of pathways to good career prospects (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:63).

Second, violent religious discrimination in schools is a common experience for Christian students, and for many, it is a primary reason to discontinue their education. The discrimination is evident in the school curriculum as well as the attitudes of teachers and other students.

2.2.1. Explicitly anti-Christian teaching and denying Christian identity

State school curricula include explicitly anti-Christian teaching, thus constituting the pressure point of denying Christian students their identity. The roots of discrimination in the curriculum date back to the introduction of Islamization policies in the 1980s by the president at that time, General Zia-ul-Haq. His reforms aimed at reshaping the entire syllabus content to inculcate Islamic thought in children and youth. In this way, they intended to permeate the entire society

with Islamic ideology and thus deprive non-Muslim students of their national identity (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:60-61). Zia meant to “create awareness in every student that he, as a member of the Pakistani nation, is also a part of the universal Muslim *Ummah*” or community (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:61).

Despite numerous attempts to reform Zia’s curriculum, his ideology continues to shape the syllabus even up to this day. The portrayal of religious minorities is inaccurate, distorted, and biased; their contribution to Pakistan’s history is omitted (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:61). A 2016 study by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), *Teaching Intolerance in Pakistan: Religious Bias in Public School Textbooks*, found that school curricula “continue to violate the constitutional rights of religious minorities by integrating Islamic ideology into most subjects and to promote a national Islamic identity at the expense of Hindu, Christian, and Sikh children” (USCIRF 2016:6).

Islamic ideology is disseminated through compulsory secular subjects such as Social/Pakistan Studies, Urdu, and English. Alarming, non-Muslim students, including Christians, are forced to learn how to read the Qur’an in their Urdu classes, with no respective provision for their faiths. Muslim students who can recite the Qur’an by heart may be awarded extra marks that facilitate their admission to higher education institutions, having a detrimental effect on Christians’ pathways to earning a university degree and securing a career (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:61).

In social studies books, the Christian contribution to the creation of Pakistan is presented in a way that classifies Christians as colonizers, oppressors, and conspirators against the Muslim community (USCIRF 2016:5). The religious and cultural identity of Christian students is thus publicly shamed. They are instructed to “learn tolerance and kind-heartedness from Muslims,” contrary to their daily experience of persecution at the hands of the Muslim community (Punjab Textbook Board 2015:84).

This biased portrayal “places religious minority students in a precarious status of either inherently flawed Pakistani citizens at best, or foreigners and enemies of the state at worst” (USCIRF 2016:6-7). If continued, this trend, as the report authors suggest, can go beyond marginalizing religious minority students as outsiders to presenting them as “dangerous contaminants to the Islamic national identity by virtue of their non-Muslim faith” (USCIRF 2016:7). Despite some apparent effort by educational authorities to remove biased curriculum content, new elements of bias and intolerance have been added (USCIRF 2016:8).

Islamiyat, an overtly religious subject teaching the tenets and practices of Islam, is not obligatory for non-Muslim students. However, an alternative course

in ethics, often taught by Muslims, singles out non-Muslims, thus making them vulnerable to discrimination. It is not offered in remote areas due to a lack of textbooks and qualified teachers, compelling students to participate in Islamic classes (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:61).

In January 2024, the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training lifted the requirement that non-Muslim students must study Islam in school. Starting with the 2024-2025 school year, students in grades 1 through 12 will be allowed to study their family religion. For Christians, the curriculum will incorporate a comprehensive study of the Bible, the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, core Christian beliefs, and church history. Contrary to the previous curriculum content that neglected or denigrated the impact of Christianity in Pakistan, the curriculum will also cover the inspirational influence of both historical Christian figures – in particular, the ministry of St. Thomas the Apostle to South Asia – and contemporary ones such as Shahbaz Bhatti, Pakistan’s Minorities Minister and a hero of the faith. Although this decision by the government marked a groundbreaking victory for religious minorities, numerous challenges remain, including the adequate training of teachers and the approval of the Christian study textbook (ICC 2024).

2.2.2. The restriction or diversion of pathways for the future

As indicated above, Christian students are disadvantaged due to their lack of allegiance to Islam. They are less able to succeed academically while in school and are restricted from pursuing further education. Some students from non-Muslim backgrounds receive lower grades, as better results and teacher support are conditioned on their conversion to Islam. For instance, a 17-year-old named Maqsood was denied higher grades unless he embraced Islam and was marked down and beaten by his teacher twice a week for refusing to do so. Other students were denied scholarships or admission to higher-level courses (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:64).

Even if Christian children complete formal education, their job prospects are dim. As Jan Alam’s studies indicate, “Even well-educated members of these groups are unemployed or work at low-paid jobs, such as sweeping, carpentering, tailoring, and peonage” (2021:42). Those who manage to succeed in their professional career risk losing their position on religious grounds.

2.2.3. Pressure points associated with violence

In the Pakistani educational system, students from Christian minority groups face three associated pressure points that include verbal, physical, and psychological forms of violence (Morley et al. 2021:9). They are also denied access to so-

cial community networks. As for verbal violence, Christian students are routinely taunted and teased with derogatory language by both teachers and students, such as calling them “dirty Christian” (*chuhra easi*) or infidel (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:64-65). The 2017 CSW report also revealed cases of psychological torment and mental abuse, such as bullying, insults, and humiliation. Christian students were accused of worshipping idols and pressured to convert to Islam. “Some school teachers have an extremist mindset and directly or indirectly try to influence non-Muslim children to convince them that their faith is illogical and contrary to the universal truth and Islam as the divine faith,” the report states (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:63). The discrimination and pressure to convert force some Christian students to quit school, as in the case of twelve Class 6 (age 12 to 13) state school students mentioned in the report (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:63).

Mob violence following false blasphemy accusations exacerbates enmity toward the Christian students. About 600 Christian children stopped going to school after the 2023 blasphemy riot in Jaranwala in Punjab province, including 10-year-old Slavish Murad, who stated, “I am afraid. All my classmates are Muslims” (Chaudhry 2023).

Christian students described in the Christian Solidarity Worldwide report were subjected to physical abuse, such as lashing, beatings, and forcing them to assume humiliating and harmful positions in front of other students. One frequently cited reason for the abuse was their refusal to convert to Islam; others were minor offenses such as misspelling work or failing to do their homework. To inflict more pain, Christian students were singled out for correction while their Muslim counterparts were spared.

Students were also denied access to social and community networks. Their classmates, often in response to direction from their teachers, would shun the Christian students and threaten to isolate them. They would be forced to eat, sit, and play separately from other students (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:63-64).

Regarding pathways into future jobs (Morley et al. 2021:3), education proves to be a significant means by which to persecute children and youth in Pakistan. Many students were reportedly forced to exit their educational program at various levels due to abuse. Thus, as the authors of the CSW report concluded, “Religious minority students are put through academic and ideological courses and procedures that prove detrimental to their future political, social and professional progress” (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:65).

The impact of persecution on the Christian students’ development is detrimental and embraces both immediate – and thus more apparent – and long-term con-

sequences. The former include mental and physical torment, such as “feeling isolated, reviled and deeply despondent” (Christian Solidarity Worldwide 2018:10), along with threats to physical safety that place their health and sometimes their life in jeopardy. These threats will affect their well-being in the long run.

As identified in the Open Doors report (2021:4), religious persecution of children and youth is marked by isolation, identity shaping, and harshness. In the Pakistani context, isolation from family and the local Christian community occurs via the abduction of a child or youth. Also, young people are often denied access to one or both Christian parents due to abduction, imprisonment, or killing of the guardians. As a result of experiencing discrimination and harassment in the school setting, Christian students lack positive school and community relationships. Sexual violence committed against them also carries a risk of social isolation due to a shame-based mindset and social stigma.

Identity-shaping pressure points are closely linked with the educational system’s tendency to stigmatize Christians as second-class citizens who have contributed nothing of value to society and thus should not be considered good citizens. Finally, the persecution of Pakistani Christian minors bears the marks of verbal, physical, and psychological violence and, in some cases, forced marriages.

2.3. Denied access to a Christian parent

Pakistan’s infamous blasphemy law has had a detrimental impact on Christian minors in three ways. Apart from instances where minors have been subjected to accusations under the law or their community members have faced allegations under blasphemy laws, charges have been filed against the parents of minors (Daniel 2024:9), thus depriving them of access to their underage children. As of September 2021, among 29 Christians accused under the blasphemy law, four were minors. These included Shahzad Masih, a 16-year-old hospital sanitation worker; Asif Stephen, an illiterate 16-year-old Christian accused of burning pages of the Quran; and Sunny Mushtaq and Noman Asghar, ages 19 and 17, respectively, accused of committing blasphemy by receiving blasphemous sketches of the Prophet Muhammad on their WhatsApp numbers (Stark 2021:5, 16-7, 22). The remaining 25 are adult men or women, most of whom have children whose access to a Christian parent has been denied due to imprisonment.

2.4. Gender-specific persecution of minors

Although persecution affects both boys and girls, it proceeds differently depending on one’s gender. Pakistan, in general, has seen a dramatic increase in violence against children, such as sexual abuse, abduction, missing children, and child mar-

riages. In the first six months of 2023, 2,227 cases of child sexual abuse were reported in 86 newspapers. The gender divide shows only a slight difference, with girls making up 54 percent of victims and boys 46 percent. Even though all age groups are affected, children from the 6-15 age group are most vulnerable, with more boys than girls victimized in this age group (Sahil Organization 2023:4-5). While the majority of perpetrators were recruited among family acquaintances, as noted by a 2020 Associated Press investigation, they also included clerics teaching in seminaries attended by the country's poorest children (Associated Press 2022).

2.4.1. Girls: Abduction, forced marriage, and sexual violence

Underage girls face the risk of abduction, followed by rape, forced conversion to Islam, and forced marriage. These heinous practices remain imminent threats to women and children from the Christian, Hindu, and Sikh faiths. Out of 25 religious persecution instances documented by International Christian Concern in the first quarter of 2021, seven involved kidnapping, forced conversion, and marriage of minors. Published records show that some 1,000 women a year from Hindu and Christian communities are abducted, forcibly converted, and married to Muslim abductors or rapists. These figures might be understated. Zohra Yusuf, a member of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, claims that the data collection and verification process faces significant challenges; however, at least in Punjab province, the rate of forced conversions among Christian girls exceeds the number of their Hindu counterparts.

In the most viral case in 2020, a 13-year-old Christian girl, Arzoo Raja, was abducted, forcefully married, and converted to Islam in October. In December of that year, the Sindh High Court handed her custody back to her parents with the condition that she remain Muslim. Raja's 44-year-old abductor and the cleric who conducted the marriage and conversion certification maintain their innocence, stating that Raja had reached puberty or the age of consent according to Sharia law (USCIRF 2022:28).

Arzoo's case sparked an international outcry, and actions were taken to ensure the legal protection of minors. However, a proposed bill to protect minorities against forced conversion was rejected in October 2021 by a parliamentary committee. The bill was also opposed by Pakistan's Ministry of Religious Affairs. Parliamentarians argued that setting an age limit for conversions by non-Muslims "goes against Islam and the Constitution of Pakistan."

Abductions have a detrimental effect on the physical and psychological well-being of a child. They also decisively terminate the educational process of young girls. Moreover, the fear of being abducted may cause girls to be confined at home and thus be deprived of regular education.

2.4.2. *Boys: Abduction, physical violence, and rape*

Along with the prevalence of Christian girls' sexual vulnerability, a 2019 report by the US State Department points to the problem of the abduction and rape of Christian boys in Pakistan. Boys are typically kidnapped by non-state militant groups from impoverished parents with the use of threats and fraudulent promises. Subsequently, the boys are sold to members of the Afghan security forces for *bacha bazi*, a customary practice of child sexual abuse (US Department of State 2019:369). There are also reported cases of Christian boys not only being kidnapped and sexually abused but also brutally killed (Vatican News 2022). Examples include Samuel Yaqoob (age 11), abducted from a market in Faisalabad, brutally tortured, sodomized and killed, and dumped in a drain in a Christian colony in 2012. Equally disturbing is the case of a seven-year-old boy who was abducted, gang-raped, and finally strangled to death with a rope (Ibrahim 2016).

I will now analyze cases of persecution involving the persecution of minors and the measures undertaken by VOM Poland to remedy their situation. For security reasons, the names of victims have been changed.

Case 1: Widow F's daughters

Sister F is a Christian widow in Pakistan. In April 2018, F's 16-year-old son was killed when Islamic extremists attacked Christian families in the city of Quetta. In this incident, another Christian (age 24) was killed and three other persons were severely injured, including two underage girls.

Families affected by the attack had to leave their homes and hide. Due to job loss and the need to change their place of residence, they were at risk of poverty. These people finally returned to their homes to avoid losing them. However, it was unknown whether they would still be able to live there safely. As for F's family, losing the son significantly affected their financial status. Despite his young age, the boy was the only provider for the family as F's husband was paralyzed. Deprived of breadwinners, the females had no means to sustain themselves, and the family could not afford the educational costs for their three school-age girls.

Following the husband's death in October 2020, the widow and her four daughters found themselves at risk not only of impoverishment but also of psychological violence. They faced constant fear of attack. The mother did not want to leave her daughters at home without adult supervision due to the real danger of abduction and forced conversion to Islam. This pressure point severely limited their everyday life, including basic outdoor activities.

VOM Poland responded to the family's fear of abduction if the daughters were left unassisted at home by providing essential supplies to F's door. The girls' school fees were covered to offer them a pathway to a better future. Apart from

regular school fees, the project covered the sponsorship of extra lessons by a private teacher.

The consequences of the 2018 Quetta attack severely limited the educational possibilities of other children from affected families. After a period of hiding, they eventually returned to school. The children were enrolled in private schools following the local partners' recommendation to place them in a school environment that offered better education and was less discriminatory towards Christian students.

Case 2: Brick kiln workers

The economic situation of Christian families is dire. They can find only menial labor as employment, with average daily earnings amounting to 5 or 6 euros. Older children (or adult children) work when possible, helping their parents to support the family. Forced to take up a job, minors are deprived of access to education and, thus, a pathway to a better future.

The daily cost of sustenance is approximately 1.50 euros per day per person, or about 45 euros per month. In the case of an unexpected crisis, most commonly sickness or death, the family must take out a loan. The repayment conditions may seem reasonable initially, but as the loan is sold to the brick owner, they are modified, making the loan unpayable and forcing the family into years of brick kiln slavery. The family is subsequently relocated to the factory compound. The costs of living there and the remuneration are calculated in a way that makes the loan impossible to pay off.

In brick kilns, underage children are subjected to forced labor alongside their parents. Unless they are bought out of the kiln, they lose their chance for education as the kiln owners provide none. They are doomed to lifelong illiteracy and forced labor.

Even though Christian families are not the only victims of brick kiln slavery, they are more disadvantaged than other faith groups. Christians are forced to convert to Islam, and women often are sexually harassed. Typically, if they refuse to convert, they are penalized by further deterioration of their living conditions and increased work requirements. The examples of two selected families, now under the care of VOM Poland, illustrate this scenario.

T took a loan of 1550 euros because he and his wife needed medical care for their illnesses. The monthly payments were reasonable initially but changed over time, and eventually the family could not meet them. Accordingly, they moved to a brick kiln where they worked as enslaved people for many hours a day and sometimes even at night. T and his wife have four children, aged four to nine, who had to work alongside their parents. Their pathway to a successful career was blocked, as no access to education was provided.

Following their release in October 2021, after five years in slavery, the family received financial support for five months from VOM Poland to buy groceries and pay their bills. This family also received a Bible and can now read it for themselves for the first time. None of the family members had ever attended school, so a new chapter of education started for them. The children were admitted to school, and the parents began attending home literacy classes. Their whole life is being slowly regenerated and transformed – from the look of their faces, clothes, home, social position, and spiritual growth to their education and professional opportunities.

The story of S's family, besides impoverishment and deprivation of educational opportunities, highlights the more acute stresses that young Christian girls face. A Christian man, his wife, and five children had been enslaved for 16 years in one of the infamous Pakistani brick kilns, doing work beyond their strength and living in deplorable conditions, before they were released in 2020. The family's situation worsened when the owner of the brick kiln (Muslim) started regularly harassing and threatening them. He demanded that the father provide his teenage daughters as wives for the kiln owner's sons.

The support offered by VOM Poland to S's family followed the normal procedure followed by this NGO: release from slavery, six months of aid provision, and then employment assistance to reintegrate them into the labor market. In December 2020, VOM Poland's partner, accompanied by a local pastor, showed up at the brick kiln and paid off S's loan. The family could then safely leave the place and start the process of rebuilding a normal life. For half a year, VOM Poland supported this family to help them cover daily expenses and recover peacefully from their traumatic experience. At the beginning of June 2021, VOM Poland began to position the family for independence by donating a rickshaw to S, who had been a professional driver before he ended up in the brick kiln factory. He is now able to generate a decent income to support the whole family.

The cases presented here have explored the psychological violence Christian families experience in brick kilns. Thanks to VOM Poland's intervention, the threats of physical violence did not materialize in these cases. E and his family were less fortunate. E and his wife had three daughters (age 15, 13, and 9) and a son, age 10. They worked for 25 years in a brick kiln factory. However, in the early spring of 2022, their conditions worsened as the kiln owner and their Muslim co-workers became more and more aggressive toward the family. The family faced severe persecution because of their Christian faith and was forced to convert to Islam. The aggression culminated in a particularly atrocious act against the 13-year-old daughter. On 21 March 2022, two Muslim co-workers, age 35 to 45, kidnapped the teenage girl, raped her for many hours, and left her unconscious

in an abandoned place. The girl's mother was emotionally devastated. The girl needed a medical checkup and psychological and spiritual post-traumatic care.

The family received some legal aid from the local church to see the two perpetrators punished. One culprit was finally arrested. However, he was quickly released as the girl's family officially pardoned him. The family could have faced severe consequences for pressing charges. Also, rape is not seen as a severe crime in Pakistan.

The VOM Poland team viewed this as an emergency situation, as staying in such conditions devastates a victim of gang rape and exposes the whole family, especially the other female members, to additional persecution and violence – particularly since the perpetrators remained in the community with no restraint.

It was thus imperative to move this family to safety. VOM Poland started medical therapy and trauma healing for the girl immediately. Parents and the oldest daughter started a six-month adult literacy course. The two youngest children began attending primary school. Once the parents and the oldest daughter have completed their literacy course, VOM Poland equipped them for gainful employment. The affected girl underwent a 12-month medical treatment and psychological trauma therapy which resulted in her full recovery. Meanwhile, she completed a six-month adult literacy course, and is presently doing beautician vocational training.

3. Final remarks

Pakistan exemplifies most of the pressure points outlined in the Open Doors report on persecution of Christians, including anti-Christian attitudes in the education system, denied access to a Christian parent, and many forms of gender-specific persecution of minors. Underage boys and girls are systematically subjected to isolation, identity shaping, and harsh persecution. Deprivation of peaceful existence, lack of protection, and minimal prospects for quality education and career opportunities negatively affect the life satisfaction of the Pakistani Christian minority (Alam 2020). Despite the constant pressure from grassroots and international bodies, the prospects for radical change appear dim. Even though the legal and political conditions in the country may be reformed, it is hard to expect significant improvement in respect of the religious freedom rights of religious minorities. The oppression that Christians experience is not only systemic; it is a state of mind, deeply rooted in society, that would take generations to transform.

However, there seems to be a ray of hope in this otherwise pessimistic scenario. To change society is almost impossible; at best, it would entail laying a new foundation over many generations. Still, it is possible to change the lives of individual Christians and families. In this regard, as illustrated by the example of VOM Poland, the work of Christian missions and organizations is indispensable.

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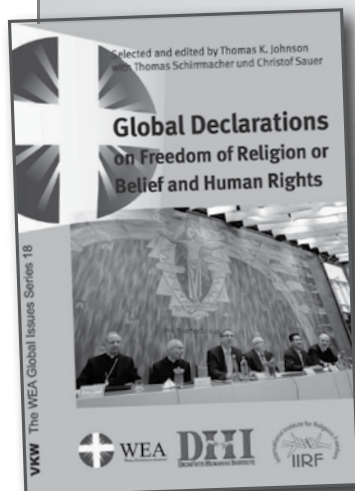
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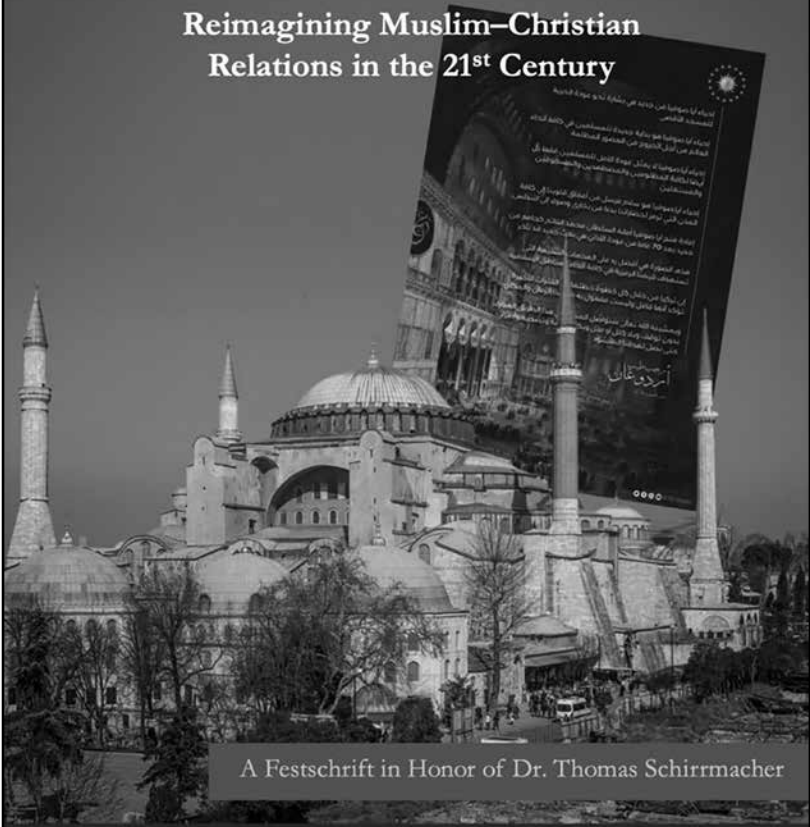


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