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Poor Marginalised Hindu Women in Pakistan

Seema Rana Maheshwary

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Abstract

The role of women is vital in the development of family, community, and society. Hindu women in Pakistan are facing multiple obstacles in their daily life. This study analyses the attitudes towards poor Hindu women living in Karachi, the capital of Sindh province, many of whom do manual labour as members of the lower classes. This study not only analyses the religious discrimination experienced by these women, through their own words, but also looks at how this intersects with gender discrimination and economic exclusion.

Keywords: Hindu women, marginalisation, discrimination, gender, religion-identity, violence, culture and traditions, community, society.

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Contents

	Acknowledgements	5
1	Introduction	5
	1.1 Background	5
	1.2 Poor marginalised women	6
	1.3 Research aims and methodology	7
	1.4 Limitations, strengths and challenges	10
2	Research findings – the challenges and the greatest threats to poor Hindu women	10
	2.1 Participatory ranking	11
	2.1.1 Discrimination based on religious identity	12
	2.1.2 Sexual harassment and bullying	14
	2.1.3 Lack of access to education for girls	15
	2.1.4 Restricted dress and mobility	16
	2.2 Discussion questions	16
	2.2.1 Dress and appearance of Hindu women	16
	2.2.2 Customs	20
	2.2.3 Women’s freedom of mobility	21
	2.2.4 Job and employment	26
	2.2.5 Access to education for Hindu girls and women	29
	2.2.6 Leisure time	31
	2.2.7 Transportation	32
	2.2.8 Women expected to conform to particular roles, including within employment	33

	2.2.9 Worship and religious practices	35
	2.2.10 Forced conversions of Hindu women and girls	38
	2.2.11 Faith abandonment	44
	2.2.12 Forced changes as a marginalised group	47
	2.2.13 Financial crises and poor women's responsibilities	48
	2.2.14 Celebrations and important occasions	50
	2.2.15 Hiding and acceptance	51
	2.2.16 Health-care services	54
	2.2.17 Hindu women's engagement with local and national authorities	55
	2.2.18 Harassment and violence	57
	2.2.19 Community response to violence against women	61
	2.2.20 State response to violence against women	62
	2.2.21 Threats to Hindus' property and assets	66
	2.2.22 Role of Hindu institutions in their women's lives	67
	2.2.23 Public perceptions of Hindu women and girls	71
3	Conclusion	73
4	Recommendations	74
	References	76
	Annexe 1: Case Studies	78
	Annexe 2: Participants of the Focus Group Discussions	81
	Annexe 3: Template Informed Participants Consent Form	83

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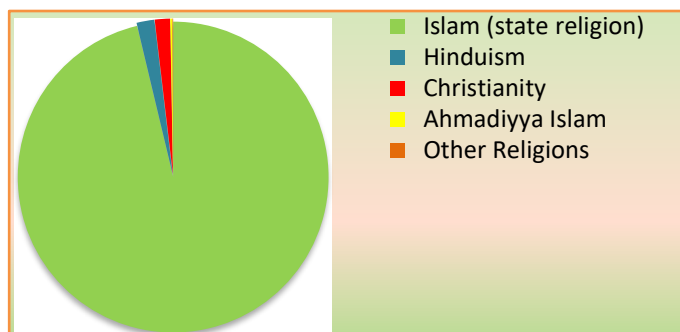
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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Pakistan's constitution promises fundamental rights, correspondence of equal opportunity, law, social, economic, and political justice, and freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship and association, subject to the law and public morality of its citizens. Pakistan is a country of various cultures, ethnicities, languages, religions, sects and sub-sects. The state religion in Pakistan is Islam, which is practised by 96.28 per cent of the population. Freedom of religion is assured by the constitution, which established equal rights to all Pakistani citizens, irrespective of their religion. The remaining 4 per cent practise Hinduism (1.6 per cent), Christianity (1.59 per cent), Ahmadiyya Islam (0.22 per cent), and Sikhism, the Bahai faith, and other religions (0.07 per cent), according to the 1998 Census (Minority Rights 2018). Though, as with other minority groups, these figures are regarded by community organisations as unreliable and out of date. The Pakistan Hindu Council, for instance, has estimated that the total Hindu population in Pakistan now exceeds eight million, which would be 4 per cent of the total population (Pakistan Hindu Council 2018).

Figure 1: A breakdown of Pakistan's population by religious affiliation.



Source: Author's own, based on data in Minority Rights (2018).

Religious minorities in Pakistan often face significant discrimination, subject to issues such as violence and misuse of the blasphemy law. It is claimed that since 1947, religious minorities went from 23 per cent to 3.7 per cent of the population, due to the violence and discrimination they faced. However, arguably the reason for this decline has more to do with the mass migration of nearly five million Hindus and Sikhs to India in 1947 and the separation of East Pakistan (Bangladesh) in 1971. At the time, East Pakistan contained nearly 22 per cent of the minorities in Pakistan, with West Pakistan being home to only 1.6 per cent of the minorities (BBC News 2019).

Hinduism is the second largest religion in Pakistan after Islam. Ninety per cent of the Hindu population in Pakistan are the poor and marginalised and they live in communities called 'Scheduled Castes', of which there are around 40. The majority are Meghwar, Kohli, Bheel, Walmikis, Wagri, Oadhs, and Bagris; these communities are the poorest of the poor and are mostly neglected in Pakistani society (Indian Institute of Dalit Studies 2008).

Pakistan's Sindh province is more diverse in terms of religion, ethnic, and cultural aspects. A religious minority, Hindus live in high-density communities in Sindh, compared to other parts of the country. In certain districts of the province, Hindu residential areas are almost equal in number to the Muslim majority, such as Tharparkar, Umer-Kot, and Mir-Pur-Khas Districts.

1.2 Poor marginalised women

There are multiple segregations in Pakistani society and this paper shows how women from religious minorities suffer disadvantage and inequality. They carry one of the heaviest burdens of all the marginalised groups in Pakistan as they face violence, discrimination and exclusion, lack of access to education, transportation, and health care, along with occupational discrimination and a high threat of abduction, forced conversion, and forced marriage. Women from religious minorities suffer from living in both a male-dominated society and a Muslim-dominated country. They experience poverty and misery differently to the men of the same class, and this amplifies their vulnerability even more and makes their life more challenging. In other words, poverty is a gendered experience; it requires a gender analysis of norms and values, division of work and responsibility, and the force of power and control endured by the poor marginalised women within the community and society.

There is overwhelming evidence to show that girls and women are more disadvantaged than boys and men in Pakistan. There is also profuse evidence of the responsibilities and

challenges that women face within both their own community and within wider society that is dissimilar from men. Persistent gender inequality and differences in women's and men's roles greatly influence the causes, experiences, and consequences of women's poverty. Policies and programmes to moderate poverty must take into account gender disparity and gender difference to effectively address the needs and constraints of the poor, both women and men.

The majority of marginalised Hindus live in rural Sindh, where girls and women in households bear a disproportionate share of the work of, and responsibility for, feeding and caring for family members through unpaid household work, alongside collecting firewood, water, and fodder, and caring for the livestock. Women living in urban areas of Karachi city are almost always engaged in working indoors, alongside outside jobs like being domestic workers (housekeeping), labourers, sanitary workers, sweepers, and selling dried fruits and bangles. Hindu women with an education are rarely allowed to work as a teacher, never mind other professional roles.

1.3 Research aims and methodology

The role of women is vital in the development of family, community, and society. Hindu women in Pakistan are facing multiple obstacles in their daily lives. This study looks at poor Hindu women living in Karachi, the capital of the Pakistani province of Sindh; it analyses the attitudes towards them, many of whom work in manual labour as members of the lowest classes. The main intent of the study is to develop learning about the experiences of poor Hindu women and how they are different from both other non-Hindu poor women and poor Hindu men. Therefore, the research aims include:

1. Understanding how poor Hindu women experience threefold marginalisation from the perspective of:
 - Gender discrimination within the wider society;
 - Discrimination due to religious identity; and
 - Gender discrimination within their own Hindu community.

2. Understanding how poor Hindu women experience life in Pakistan differently to men of the same religious background, including discrimination from wider society and cultural and socioeconomic vulnerability.

The focus group discussions (FGDs) aspired to elicit qualitative and quantitative information regarding challenges and threats faced by Hindu women with respect to their experiences of community and society, culture and traditions, and socioeconomic

vulnerability. The threats that were identified as facing these women due to their gender and their religious identity included employment, education, mobility, worship, health, transportation, faith abandonment, conversions, harassment and other violence, as well as the role of the media and the state in exacerbating the negative experiences of poor Hindu women.

Table 1: Participants in the FGDs by gender, age, and number

Group	Gender	Age	Total number
Group-W-1	Women	18–35	12
Group-W-2	Women	36–60	12
Group-H-G	Girls	14–17	10
Group-H-M	Men	18–60	12

Source: Author's own.

The FGDs included females and males from the Hindu Scheduled Caste communities (the most poor and marginalised) in urban Karachi. Three FGDs were carried out with Hindu females of different age groups to learn about their experiences with gender and religious discrimination, as well as economic exclusion. Alongside these, a parallel FGD was carried out with Hindu males in order to learn about their perceptions of poor Hindu women's vulnerabilities within their community. Table 1 shows the gender, age, and number of participants in each FGD.

This learning follows a qualitative study design, starting with participatory ranking of the key threats to poor Hindu women and then a facilitated discussion around the different themes that emerged. Through the FGDs, the researcher spoke to 46 participants. Two FGDs were carried out with adult women aged 18–35 and 36–60, one FGD with ten adolescent girls (aged 14–17) and one FGD with men (aged 18–60). The researcher and author of this paper was in a good position to connect with these marginalised Hindu women as she is also a Hindu woman living in Pakistan who has experienced similar discrimination and exclusion. This enabled her to connect well with the participants and explain the research questions in a way that she knew they would understand. She was

also able to put them at ease by sharing examples of her own marginalisation as a Hindu woman in Pakistan.

Participants were selected with the help of social and human rights activists from the different Hindu sub-communities, including factory labour workers, housemaids, teachers, nurses, sanitary workers, housewives, dried fruit and bangle sellers, and students. The males of the same communities were also from a range of professions including a women and youth rights activist, social workers, political activists, a lawyer, and a student. Meetings were held to build trust and ensure safe participation and confidentiality.

The FGDs were conducted in the period of March to May 2020, in a human rights office, a community welfare hall, and a training centre in the Karachi region. These locations were chosen to ensure privacy and to avoid any other interference and involvement from those outside of the study. The FGDs were conducted in the local language and lasted between 100 and 120 minutes. All FGDs were undertaken with the participants' approval through a consent form which was described to them as part of the research. They were assured that their identities would be kept private and they would not be asked for any specifics that would take them out of their comfort zone. The FGDs were tape recorded with the permission of participants in order to crosscheck quotes and content when writing up the report. The research topic and its aims and objectives were explained to all participants at the commencement of the FGDs.

These focus groups were designed to provide both qualitative and quantitative data through the use of participatory ranking and closed follow-up questions. The findings presented here can be used to inform and strengthen existing laws and policies that deal with the violence and discrimination faced by poor Hindu women, and challenge harmful attitudes towards religious minorities. Specific recommendations are made in Section 5.

This study concludes that poor Hindu women are experiencing discrimination due to the attitudes and customs of both their own community and wider society because of their gender, their religious identity, and their economic status. Poor Hindu women are facing problems in both their domestic and professional lives. The researcher suggests that implementation of laws should be strictly monitored. Men should review their behaviour towards women at different phases of life and the education system should be used as a tool to bring improvements to the lives of these poor Hindu women.

1.4 Limitations, strengths and challenges

The focus groups form significant learning about the experiences of poor Hindu women; however, they only included 46 people. Therefore, the information gathered does not reflect a comprehensive situational analysis, as the groups do not reflect a large, representative sample from the community. Rather, they provide insight into the experiences and perspectives of commonly overlooked Hindu women and girls living in Sindh province. The women and girls in the first three FGDs seemed quite comfortable and these participants were interested in sharing their experiences regarding the range of issues presented to them. Meanwhile, the men within the male focus group showed and expressed discomfort when speaking about the experiences of the women in their communities. The researcher perceived that various men appeared unwilling to acknowledge the extent of the negative experiences facing poor Hindu women, particularly when it came to questions about the responses of the Hindu community. The FGD with the girls was complicated by the fact that they arrived accompanied by a male family member. Having a male chaperone come to the FGD is a demonstration of the fear within the Hindu community which leads to young women and girls being restricted in their movements and ability to be out in public spaces alone. This is primarily a fear that these young women and girls will be abducted and forcibly converted to Islam. Therefore, this was an unavoidable element of the FGD that may have impacted the answers the young women and girls gave.

2 Research findings – the challenges and the greatest threats to poor Hindu women

The main findings from the data generated by the FGDs are summarised below. The consultation brought about valuable information in terms of the current challenges and daily concerns of the poor Hindu women in Karachi.

Section 2.1 outlines the challenges and greatest threats to poor women. This data was gained through participatory ranking. The subsections that follow in Section 2.1 and in Section 2.2 are thematic and paint a picture of what life is like for poor Hindu women in Pakistan, based on dialogue with the participants in the different FGDs. Many of these

thematic sections are complemented by closed questions that were presented to the FGDs. The data gathered from these questions are analysed within the appropriate thematic sections, helping to demonstrate trends as well as similarities and differences between the views of the women and men.

2.1 Participatory ranking

Minorities such as Hindus face challenges in Pakistani society. The situation facing Hindu women and girls is continuously getting worse. There are multiple threats of violence against women because of both their gender and their religion, and Hindu women are mostly targeted by the dominating majority in order to weaken minorities living in Pakistan. These marginalised women are particularly helpless as no mechanism is designed to protect them. There are a number of challenges and threats against Hindu women and girls which were rated by the four FGDs, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Threats facing Hindu women and girls, ranked from most severe and widespread to least

No.	Threats	Group- H-G (14–17)	Group- W-1 (18–35)	Group- W-2 (36–60)	Group- H-M (18–60)	Total
1	Discrimination based on religious identity	09	12	10	11	42
2	Sexual harassment and bullying	09	11	10	10	40
3	Abductions of young girls and women	08	10	11	11	40
4	Forced conversions and forced marriages	09	10	10	11	40
5	Gender discrimination within community and society	10	11	12	05	38
6	Lack of access to education for girls	08	12	09	08	37

7	Restricted dress and mobility	08	10	11	06	35
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Source: Author's own.

Participants across all four groups were prompted to describe the greatest threats facing poor Hindu women and then encouraged to rank these threats. The numbers in Table 2 reflect how many members of each FGD ranked each threat as number one. Some participants ranked more than one issue as the greatest threat. The numbers of participants from each FGD for each threat were then added up, revealing these seven threats in the order presented. As shown, discrimination based on religious identity came out as the number one threat for 42 participants (91 per cent), followed by three threats all ranked number one by 40 participants (87 per cent). These were sexual harassment and bullying, abduction of young women and girls, and forced conversions and forced marriages. Interestingly, if the men's votes are removed from this table, gender discrimination within their community and society would be ranked number one overall, by 33 out of 34 women and girls (97 per cent). It is perhaps unsurprising that less than 50 per cent of the men voted for this as being the main threat given that it would have reflected their own role in maintaining gender discrimination within the Hindu community.

These themes are presented briefly below and are then expanded on throughout the thematic sections that follow, alongside other threats that were identified.

2.1.1 Discrimination based on religious identity

Religious identity is very challenging for Hindu women compared to women from the majority Islam. They are bullied and sexually harassed due to their dress and appearance when they go out in public, as well as at their workplace. Married Hindu women are restricted to wearing traditional Hindu clothing such as the Saari and Ghagra-Choli, along with Sindoor, Mangal-Sootar, and Bindiya.¹ Both Sindoor and Bindiya are worn by married women on their heads, to symbolise their marital status. Mangal-Sootar also indicates marital status and is a necklace of black beads worn around the neck. This makes these women identifiable as Hindu in public. This theme intersects with almost all

¹ Saari – a garment worn by Hindu women, consisting of a long piece of cotton or silk wrapped around the body with one end draped over the head or over one shoulder; Ghagra-Choli – a form of skirt which is long, embroidered and pleated, and is secured at the waist or hips and leaves the lower back and midriff bare; Sindoor – a traditional vermilion red or orange-red coloured cosmetic powder usually worn by married Hindu women along the parting of their hair; Mangal-Sootar – a necklace made of black beads that a Hindu woman wears to indicate that she is married; Bindiya – a red spot worn on the forehead of a married Hindu woman.

of the other threats identified in the following sections, including women's freedom of mobility, their job and employment opportunities, and their ability to worship freely, to name just a few.

A participant (woman aged 18–35) who works in a factory shared:

My male colleagues told me, 'Don't you feel unethical, wearing such a dress? Shame on you and your males who don't stop you wearing naked clothes. It's better to either change your way of dressing or leave this job.'

When using the phrase 'naked clothes', the men were referring to the fact that traditional Hindu women's clothing exposes the stomach and neck.

Their religious identity even comes into question when they want to rent a home in a decent locality. If the owners become aware of their religious identity they will almost certainly flatly refuse to rent the premises; and if any landlord is willing to rent their premises to them, they increase the rent.

Participant (man aged 18–60) said:

Hindus also have to face trouble to find houses on rent, we have to search areas where Hindus are living in thick population. Others are denied to rent a house. Me and my sons were looking to rent a house in Kharadar area, where we were refused by at least three owners when they came to know that we are Hindus. They said we can't allow any Hindu to be a resident here. When I asked, 'Are we not human beings?', one of them said, 'You are human being but not a Muslim and we do not want to adjust to any non-Muslim here'.

Participant (woman aged 18–35) who works in a factory shared:

We are living in a very small two rooms house. I have six children and one of them is disabled, and my sister-in-law lives in another small room with her three kids. We decided to try to rent a home where at least we may settle better than this one, but when we visited places for rent many estate agents were looking at our dresses and said it is very hard to rent houses for us in this area. In another place one man suggested to me that me and my husband better search for houses near other Hindu community because 'here Hindus are not allowed to be residents'.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

We were looking for a rental house. When we visited a house to finalise everything and hand over token money to the relevant person, suddenly the owner asked, 'What is your caste?' We said: 'Actually we are Hindus.' The owner's facial expression changed and she gave back our token money with a excuse, saying, 'This flat is available only for Muslims, not for any of Hindus and Christians'.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) shared:

After the days when the incident at Babri Mosque took place in 1992, our community got highly afraid when few extremists started to attack temples in Karachi and other parts of the country. Most of us Hindus, who lived in colony of Hindu-Para compound surrounded by temples and other Hindus, were asked to shift our females to the homes of relatives who lived far away from the thick Hindu population, or where they may be safe from any attacks. We moved and stayed a few days at relatives' homes and villages. That period was very fearful for all Hindus living in Pakistan. We were safe and secure but were very afraid. Our men tried their level best to shift women and children to safe places until the situation improved. Well no such attacks were made towards our community's women, but that was a really dangerous time of living in fear. Even many years later we all were in fear and depression that any incident or negativity may take place with us.

2.1.2 Sexual harassment and bullying

Poor Hindu women experience harassment and violence in many different areas of their lives. One particularly prominent aspect is travelling on public transport: they face harassment from males sitting in the back portion of buses through offensive gestures, staring, and asking for their number in sign language. Even bus drivers and conductors harass Hindu women. Several women said they actively warn them and ask them to stop their behaviour and stop harassing them; however, many keep silent and do not react as this is routine and they regularly have to travel.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) said:

Usually we working women try to avoid the harassment that comes on a daily basis in vehicles and while walking on the roads. Even now we Hindu women carry additional chaddar [a big scarf] to cover our dresses. Once on the bus I

was sitting very close to the driver's seat. When I was about to get off at my destination the driver squeezed my waist. When I angrily looked at him he pushed the bus brake really hard which made me fall over. I stood up and got down off the bus. From that day I always look at the bus driver to see if he is the same or another one, as I never want to face that driver again. I need to travel in the similar bus but I am afraid that he can get me in trouble and hit me.

Participant (woman aged 18–35) said:

As I was passing out to get down from the bus, the conductor pressed my stomach deliberately. When I countered, he said: 'Don't lie, otherwise I will beat you. You Hindu women are Beshram and Begarat [ashamed and dishonoured] by wearing exposing clothes showing tummy and neck.' He then threw my shopping bag onto the road.

Hindu women and girls, mostly in Sindh, are abducted, tortured, and threatened with forced conversion into Islam through forced marriage with Muslim men. When aggrieved families register the forced conversion, the kidnappers usually counter on behalf of the woman or girl, claiming that she had converted to Islam and married happily according to her own will. This is explored in much more detail in Section 2.2, particularly in the subsection 'Forced conversions of Hindu women and girls'.

2.1.3 Gender discrimination within community and society

Gender discrimination, just like discrimination on the basis of religious identity, is present in many of the following themes. Quotes from the women participants suggest that Hindu women are restricted in their mobility, dress, and ability to work by their communities, often with the justification that it is for their own protection. Gender discrimination also plays into the violence that Hindu women and girls face, including forced conversion through kidnapping and forced marriage, as this tactic is applied almost exclusively to young women and girls, not to Hindu boys.

2.1.3 Lack of access to education for girls

The author notes that, as an educated Hindu woman herself, education acts as a barrier of sorts for Hindu women and girls, protecting them from some of the discrimination they face in public. This is particularly because educated Hindu women who work in an office or public place are often able to negotiate wearing different clothing that is more like the

clothing worn by women from the Muslim majority. Therefore, when girls are denied education within the Hindu community – which is often the case – it is not only their future job prospects and economic status that are affected, but their ability to ‘hide’ their religious markings, if they so desired, is also reduced.

2.1.4 Restricted dress and mobility

As discussed above, the traditional Hindu dress that the Hindu community expects their women and girls to wear increases the discrimination that these women face, as they become more identifiable in public. Their mobility is also restricted by members of their community. The interlinkages between threats facing poor Hindu women are a feature in the thematic subsections of Section 2.2, painting a complex picture of the interconnected inequalities facing poor Hindu women from all directions.

2.2 Discussion questions

Following the participatory ranking exercise, closed questions were asked to the FGDs on the different themes that had emerged. These themes are explored in more detail in the following subsections.

2.2.1 Dress and appearance of Hindu women

The participants in all the FGDs were asked three closed questions relating to the dress and appearance of Hindu women. Tables A, B, and C show the breakdown of answers across the FGDs for each question:

A. Does your community limit you/women in your community to wear only traditional Hindu clothing?

Table A				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	09	01	00	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	12	00	00	00

Group-W-2 (36–60)	10	02	00	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	09	03	00	00

Source: Author's own.

Hindu women face more disadvantages than Hindu men of the same class and women of the majority religion. Hindu women are expected to dress in a typically feminine way, carrying with them all the religious and cultural markers that symbolise both their religion and their marital status. This is shown in Table B, where there is general agreement across the FGDs that Hindu women are expected to wear traditional dress by their community compared to the men from the same community and women of the majority religion who are not required to show their marital status.

As mentioned in the Section 2.1, Hindu women, particularly those who are married, are restricted to wearing traditional clothing, which is symbolic and considered to be important by their communities. The women may or may not want to wear this traditional clothing. However, the elders, who are mostly men, compel the women to do so: because the traditional dress code represents their ancestors' customs and culture they believe people within the community would make fun of them and shame them if the women do not conform. Young Hindu women and girls also cannot wear modern clothes that young women and girls from the majority religion wear; if they ask their families to buy modern clothing, they are refused.

B. Do you/the Hindu women in your community wear traditional clothing out in public without any stress, like women from the majority religion?

Table B				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	00	08	02	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	00	12	00	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	01	11	00	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	08	04	00	00

Source: Author's own.

C. Do you/the Hindu women in your community face any hurdles or objections from the wider society and culture of other faiths for dressing in a way that marks them out as Hindu women?

Table C				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	08	01	01	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	12	00	00	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	11	01	00	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	04	07	01	00

Source: Author's own.

As Tables B and C show, the majority of Hindu men expressed that they felt women from their community could wear traditional clothing in public without experiencing any stress, hurdles, or objections from people of other faiths. This view was contrary to that of almost all of the women participating. This implies that Hindu men are not aware of the struggles that Hindu women face when it comes to wearing traditional clothing in public. Additionally, the fact that women and girls across all of the FGDs almost unanimously expressed that they experience stress, hurdles, and objections suggests that this is a serious issue that is a regular part of a Hindu woman's existence in Pakistan.

Women said that their dress is pointed out by the majority of people in a way that highlights their religious identity compared to the majority women in the society. The people from the majority religion make them feel uncomfortable by bullying and teasing their dress, mainly because certain body parts (neck and stomach) are visible in traditional Hindu dress, which is not acceptable in traditional Muslim dress. Sometimes these Hindu women are taunted by suggestions that they should wear Shalwar-Qamez like Muslim women in the majority. This is particularly difficult for the Hindu women who do not wish to wear their traditional cultural clothing, as they will usually be disliked or considered to be of bad character by their own community. Whether they like their traditional clothing or not, Hindu women suffer in the wider society and their own community when it comes to their dress and appearance.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) shared:

My male colleagues told me, 'Don't you feel immoral and shameful wearing such a dress that shows your tummy and neck? Why do Hindu women wear abaya [veil] but your community and men don't stop you wearing this Besharmi [shameful] clothing? Dhoob-Maró [go and die in water].'

Participant (woman aged 36–60) shared:

My father-in-law came home and shared with my husband that people sitting outside called me and asked why the women of our family wear dresses like 'Gaghra Choli' and 'Saari' and was asking if we wear undergarments under the skirts or if we are Nagi [naked] inside. These words made all family members shocked and my husband told me, 'From now wear only Shalwar-Qamez as majority women used to wear.'

As shown above, the issue of discrimination based on dress and appearance intersects with that of violence and harassment, as well as that of restrictions to women's freedom. Consequently, more quotes describing the horrific violence and harassment facing poor Hindu women can be found in the subsections that follow.

The men who stated that Hindu women do not experience any stress, hurdles, or objections when wearing traditional dress in public said that dressing in a traditional way is a cultural practice of daily routine which must be followed. However, a small number of the men did agree that their women faced hurdles and harassment due to cultural dress. Both viewpoints are demonstrated in the following quotes.

Participant (man aged 18–60) said:

Nowadays females have much freedom. They are not restricted from going outside, they may go shopping, on outings and for other needs, but we prefer our women and girls to go with older women or with male family members which is only for their safety.

Participant (man aged 18–60) shared:

I also allow my wife to wear general dress, 'Shalwar-Qamez', as majority women wear, but only for visiting where I feel it's necessary, like travelling out of the city or going to the hospital, where I feel people judge us by Hindu women's outfits that may create some harassing incident. To avoid those I prefer for my wife to wear the mainstream clothing.

Participant (man aged 18–60) shared:

Hindu females are not forced to wear traditional dresses; however that is Hinduism's cultural practices from over the centuries. We follow our ancestors' ways, so we do not think our females are getting harassed due to our cultural dress. In our society males usually tease and bully all women and this is the reason that we Hindu men ask our females to not go out alone. They must be accompanied by male family members if there is an emergency that requires them to go outside.

2.2.2 Customs

Participants were asked about religious customs, and if there were ever situations where poor Hindu women had to adopt or observe customs that were not part of their own religion. As Table D shows, there was almost complete agreement that poor Hindu women do have to observe religious customs when out in public that are not part of their own religion. This is explored in more detail below.

D. When out in public, are there any religious customs that poor Hindu women have to observe that are not a part of their religion?

Table D				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	09	01	00	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	10	02	00	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	12	00	00	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	12	00	00	00

Source: Author's own.

There are many customs practised among majority people, like Namaz, Azan, Ramadan, Ashoora, women dressing in abayas, veils, etc., which are very common. However, it is the Ramadan activities that mostly affect religious minorities living in Pakistan.

Throughout this month of fasting, people belonging to religious minorities also cannot eat

meals and drink water in public during the daytime. People from religious minorities, including children in school, have to follow the same customs. The people from the religious majority get angry and make objections if anyone is caught eating or drinking in public. They sometimes angrily call ‘*Kafar*’ – a highly derogatory term used against non-Muslims – if they see minority people hiding their eating and drinking.

During prayer calls (*Azan*) from mosques, Hindus keep silent in respect, turn off music, and turn down their TV volume, but Hindus are not reciprocated in the same way for their religious customs and festivals. For example, during Hindu festivals like Diwali, the majority people raise objections against celebrations with firecrackers, and a few people make offensive gestures upon seeing Hindus wearing the customary *Tilak* and *Malaa* (Paternoster). *Tilak* is a religious sign or small tattoo painted on the foreheads of men and women during prayers in the temple and *Malaa* is a string of beads used to count during the recitation of prayers.

One participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

During travelling in public bus with family my younger sister drank water in the bus. The driver got angry and made her ashamed for doing so in the month of Ramadan while majority are fasting.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

My cousin was asked by her classmate in school to change her seat [where she used to sit regularly] saying, ‘please, I fast and do not want to sit with a Hindu girl during the holy Month of Ramadan’. Even the teacher supported the classmate and ignored my cousin’s complaint.

2.2.3 Women’s freedom of mobility

Participants were asked four questions related to Hindu women’s freedom of mobility.

E. Do your family or community members restrict your/the women in your community’s mobility?

Table E				
Groups	Yes	No	Don’t know	No answer

Group-H-G (14–17)	08	02	00	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	07	05	00	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	10	02	00	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	06	06	00	00

Source: Author's own.

F. Do the community do this for reasons of your/the women in your community's protection?

Table F				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	05	02	02	01
Group-W-1 (18–35)	06	04	02	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	04	07	00	01
Group-H-M (18–60)	10	02	00	00

Source: Author's own.

G. Does your community want you/the women in your community to associate with other religious groups?

Table G				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	00	08	02	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	00	12	00	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	01	10	00	01

Group-H-M (18–60)	03	07	02	00
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Source: Author's own.

E. Do you think stopping women's mobility is fine?

Table H				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	00	10	00	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	02	10	00	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	00	12	00	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	08	02	00	02

Source: Author's own.

Table E shows that 74 per cent of women and girls felt their mobility was restricted, compared to 50 per cent of men. However, Table F shows us that despite less men believing that they or others in their community restrict the women in their community, 83 per cent of men agreed that were this restriction to happen it would be to protect women. Additionally, Table H shows that 67 per cent of men felt that restricting women's mobility is acceptable.

These views are not shared by Hindu women. While Table F shows us that the majority of women and girls aged 14–35 felt that the restriction on their mobility was for their protection, 58 per cent of women aged 36–60 did not agree. Women also felt more strongly than men that their community did not want them associating with other religious groups (see Table G). Additionally, 94 per cent of women felt that restricting women's mobility was not OK. Clearly, women's mobility is an immense issue that affects poor Hindu women in a way that the men in their community either do not want to accept (or discuss) or are simply not aware of.

Social movement of poor Hindu women living in the urban and rural areas of Sindh province is mostly restricted to the domestic boundaries of the home. The dominance of sociocultural traditions has badly affected the freedom of women's mobility. Hindu women are allowed to visit relatives in surrounding areas, but cannot go outside without

permission from the men in their community or travel out of the city without a man. This is considered to be for the security and protection of the women.

Even working Hindu women face harassment on a daily basis. Family members do not pay heed to the women's complaints about their experiences, instead instructing females to cover their heads to protect themselves. Females are considered to hold the community's honour and if something happened to them it would make the men in their community ashamed. Communities do not want females to associate with other religious groups in fear of women and girls being exposed to exploitation, abduction and forced conversion, of which there have been frequent cases for decades in Sindh province. Parents also feel bound to the communities' beliefs and attitudes, including the community gossip if girls go out alone. However, restricting women and girls' mobility is not fine; it just restricts their abilities and mental growth.

More interestingly, the female participants assumed that life would be more easy and free if they were born as boys instead of girls. They felt that at least they would be able to enjoy freedom and a comfortable life as boys in their communities appear to.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

My sister was willing to get education four or five years ago. But suddenly few kidnapping incidents of Hindu girls took place that made my parents apprehensive. My sister had her studies discontinued after her 8th standard and I am only studying in college under my parents' supervision. They pick me up from college and drop me off.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

There is a temple very close to my home, within walking distance, where I and my family go for Puja and Arti [worship] occasionally. I am very devoted to Lord Krishana and wish to go regularly, but whenever they cannot take me I asked if they could let me go with my brother. My parents refused strictly, saying community will mind and gossip about my character. Well, being a girl, I cannot even go to Manidir [temple] on my own.

All of the female participants believe that freedom of mobility is their right but tradition makes it taboo for them. They wish to live the freedom that men have; the freedom to easily go out and celebrate with friends, colleagues, and other members of communities. In fact, because of restrictions on their mobility, many females cannot work outside the home after marriage, no matter how skilled and well educated they are.

Two participants (women aged 36–60), named Savita (ex-nurse) and Banu (ex-schoolteacher), gave examples to demonstrate their inability to work. They were both used to working after marriage; however, their husbands and in-laws were unhappy with their jobs and therefore, they had to stop working. Generally, Hindu women's in-laws and husbands do not like them to work outside of the house, no matter how skilled they are or how much the family is suffering financially, as it would bring dishonour onto the family and bring shame onto the husband in particular.

However, Savita said:

I have started job again to meet the needs and education of my children, as economically we are very broken. But my husband taunts and keeps making conflict which really disturbs my domestic life.

Banu said:

I had to stop teaching and was asked to utilise my skills as tuition teacher at home, then at school, and then going out. However, my miscarriage was claimed to be because I had an outdoor job.

As explored above, men overwhelmingly responded that women's mobility is not restricted. Instead they said that women over the age of 18 in their communities can go out easily, while young women can go out with family members. The men claimed that there are some traditions that the entire community should follow for women's own safety, and out of respect. Women are restricted due to communities' norms. They seek permission from husbands and elders even when they go out to meet their parents along with their husband or any other family member. Working women can only go to work with other females from the community (who also work there), but only for work and any other market activity. For general travelling, especially far from the surrounding area, all Hindu women have to move around with men. The community, and men particularly, claim they are conscious to protect females as many violent cases take place against women in the society in which they live.

Participant (man aged 18–60) expressed:

Yes, mobility is an issue for our community's women. It's all about traditions and the mentality of the men, even many educated males, liberal males, and others who work for community service and speak out about the rights of minorities. All of these men control women's freedom, and do not support owning women's mobility as they practise themselves.

Participant (man aged 18–60) shared:

Hindu women and especially Hindu girls now are getting education. They are allowed to go outside, but we prefer them to go with older women or with the male of the family. This is because we hear about abduction, conversion of religion and about many other incidents with females. So due to our women's and girls' protection we restrict them to not go alone.

Participant (man aged 18–60) stated:

Our Hindu community is very backwards in education and awareness, especially for girls' education. Our community elders either they are men or women who think women should only stay at home, look after their family and do home chores. These elders do not like women to go out, even in marriage ceremony, except with the closest relatives. Our community fears that women's mobility can cause trouble within the family and affect men's honour in the society. If our women will be going out, they will be communicating with unknown people and other activities that will bring disrespect (Badnami) onto the family.

2.2.4 Job and employment

In urban areas, poor Hindu women are mainly employed in manual jobs as sanitary workers, housemaids, home-based workers, and labour workers in factories. In rural areas, Hindu women handle small agricultural tasks including harvesting and picking cotton and other crops. However, Hindu women face many difficulties to get a job, even when looking for odd jobs. There is a divergence between the opportunities offered to women of minority communities and Muslim women. For example, when women apply for odd jobs such as a guard who checks females' bags in shopping malls and in offices, they are often instead assigned cleaning jobs in offices and washrooms. Even those qualified to Primary or up to 7th/8th standard are engaged in similar jobs. They are not considered for the jobs they are qualified for. Social and religious factors have further restricted women from entering the job market, even though with increased economic pressures women from all classes are trying to enter the workforce.

Women chose good jobs, as their identity and appearance create hurdles. They face discrimination when they apply for jobs and are mostly offered menial work of cleaning or washing the bathroom. The same happens with poor Hindu men. Some believe that educated Hindu people face even more trouble than those who are uneducated, as most

of them cannot get the jobs they are qualified to do in the private sector or in government departments. Despite there being a 5 per cent quota for minorities, 'for the religious minorities' members lucky enough to land government jobs, the only positions available at dozens of departments for them are of sanitation workers' (Ali 2012). Even with a strong education, Hindu men and women are relegated to menial work while 'uneducated Muslim are appointed as clerks' (*ibid.*).

Working women are often denied annual leave for religious festivals. They are discriminated against due to their religious identity by colleagues, with some co-workers making degrading comments about their religion and refusing to eat with them. Their religion is always looked down upon and females are often encouraged to convert to Islam by their workmates. People often make jokes about their religious practices and this depresses them.

Participant (woman aged 18–35) shared:

Usually people in our surrounding area where we sell our goods, they ask us, 'Why you do not convert to Islam? Your men send you to do such odd jobs on the roadside, but if you were Muslim and would marry a Muslim man, he would meet every need you have and would not let you do labour work. You would be safe and secure with a good life, even we can support you.'

Participant (woman aged 36–60) shared:

My female colleague at school where I was a teacher asked me to convert. She told me, 'Your religion has no respect of women and in our religion women has much respect. Our people would admire you and support you if you take such a step.'

Participant (girl aged 14–17) stated:

My schoolteacher refused me for half day off, and said, 'If you have occasion then why did you come to school? I think you should be Muslim, at least then you would get whole holidays off, not partially. You are a very good student, you must think about it.'

Participant (girl aged 14–17) stated:

Usually Muslim boys pass comments and make fun of our religion, as we follow idols and many Gods and Goddesses, as well as animal-faced Gods. They hurt us and make us depressed through bullying and teasing, saying these words about our religion. Sometimes they ask Hindu girls to convert and

propose marriage. My cousin discontinued her education when a person daily started to chase her after college. One day he stopped her on the way and asked, 'I daily follow you which you know. Well I like you a lot and I know that you are Hindu, I want to marry you. Let's get you converted. If you reject me I will kidnap you.' My cousin asked to think about it and from the next day she left college due to fear.

Hindu women of different sub-communities (Scheduled Castes) mostly work as housemaids in houses, as sweepers, sanitary workers in government and the private sector, in factories as labourers, as bangle (an ornament/wristlet) makers and dried fruit sellers. Many work at home, cutting leather gloves, sewing clothes, etc. and the educated Hindu women are employed as teachers. Other skilled women work either in beauty parlours or at home as beauticians. These are the only jobs available to them.

The Hindu men are also discriminated against in the workplace: they do not get promotions, they are refused leave for their festivals, and both uneducated males and females are usually the ones hired for odd jobs such as cleaning and sweeping. However, at work Hindu women face more harassment than men, especially about their clothing, and are paid less compared to men for the same jobs.

Participant Mr Mohan (man aged 18–60) said:

The Constitution of Pakistan has a job quota of 5 per cent for religious minorities, to empower us within the society. Unfortunately, only the Sindh Health Department has followed it, which is admirable, but other departments are failing to fulfill the constitutional implementation. It is the government's responsibility to secure minorities rights.

Participant (man aged 18–60) shared:

One of my friends was working as a travelling agent. He went on leave for two weeks, for his sister's wedding ceremony, and when he got back to his job he was informed to be terminated for taking two additional days off.

Participant (woman aged 36–60), who works as a housemaid, shared:

Due to my husband's sudden sickness, I could not manage to go to work for a week, and was not able to inform my begum-sahiba [female-employer] as we have no cell phone. When I go back I was paid half salary due to my time off, and after one week I was terminated for taking one more day off.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) stated:

Here in our country women who go for jobs do not get paid an equal salary for the same jobs as men do. Even Hindu men get good salaries and wages while women are paid 10 to 20 per cent less than men. I am working as sweeper where I am paid less wages than my husband, even though he is also doing same work. I asked my female relative who are working similarly and they also shared the same situation, even though women work harder and with dedication.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) said:

I sew clothes for which I am paid 400 to 500 rupees for one dress while my male cousin earns 700 to 1,000 rupees as he works from shop and I work from home. People take advantage of females' compulsion and needs, as females cannot open shops in markets. That's why people find females who sew clothes from home and charge less even though I work harder, look after the home, do home chores and sew clothes late into the night when I get free from my house chores.

2.2.5 Access to education for Hindu girls and women

Education is a right for women; it can develop their capabilities to bring social change and competitive socioeconomic empowerment. Hindu women and girls are extremely restricted in education, especially Scheduled Caste Hindu women who are often illiterate compared to the males in their community and women of other groups. They face discriminatory attitudes within their communities and in educational institutions due to both gender and religious identity. An Asian Human Rights Commission report indicated that 87 per cent of Scheduled Caste Hindu women are illiterate compared to 63.5 per cent of males in their community. The average national illiteracy rate among Pakistani women is 58 per cent (Thibaud 2010).

Poor marginalised Hindu communities prefer not to support education for their women and girls. As already explored, Hindu girls are restricted in so many ways and are hardly allowed to access education, as their culture and traditions believe that girls and women only have to be concerned with marriage and looking after the home and children. Therefore, education has no use for them. This is a clear demonstration of the gender discrimination that takes place within the Hindu community, favouring boys for education over girls and placing girls' value purely in the domestic realm. While this

happens to all Hindu women, it is more likely to take place with the poor Hindu communities.

Religious discrimination is very common with schoolgoing children as they are often asked to convert to Islam. This experience happens to both male and female students, and many of the participants themselves had experienced it. A few of the participants explained how they do not send their teenage girls to school as they fear incidents of harassment, kidnapping, and conversion. Children are also harmed physically and bullied, experiencing nasty chants from other children such as, 'Hindu, Hindu'. The Hindu children have to study Islamiyat (a subject related to the majority religion) as a compulsory subject, even though Hindu children cannot understand the Arabic language. The subject of ethics would be a more appropriate alternative to them; however, it is optional and only available to those in 10th standard for which no teacher is available. Muslim students receive bonus grade points for memorising the Holy Qur'an, but there are no opportunities for extra academic credit available for religious minority students.

Participant (woman aged 18–35) shared:

My children were not allowed to sit on the stage during school functions, therefore I changed their school. Yet religious discrimination in government school is more common than in private schools.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

In my school different groups were selected for a class activity and the best performers were selected to lead the groups in the task. I was selected as group leader, meeting the criteria, but the very next day my teacher excused me saying the group leader is supposed to be Muslim. My teacher said that my identity could raise some objections and risk the progress of all group members. They said that I should either change my name so I could keep the leading position or withdraw. I denied to change my name and I had to withdraw.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared her experience of harsh behaviour by her teacher during an Islamic subject class:

The teacher said to me, 'wearing burqa and abaya [veil] is not only for Muslim women but it's also necessary for you Hindu girls as well.' When I explained that we Hindus do not wear veil, and it is not mentioned in holy book of Geeta, the teacher got angry. Later I was marked very low in exams even though I

am good at my studies and always make A-grade, even in Islamiat subject. I have been studying since the nursery class and I always get good marks. How could I get very low marks after that incident?

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared how her relative's son went for coaching classes. The teacher started to teach him the 'Holy Book, Qur'an'. Knowing this, his parents stopped sending him for classes rather than making a complaint to the tutor.

2.2.6 Leisure time

Women cannot have their own special leisure time or free time for themselves. After marriage, life becomes what is called a 'twenty hours' job. During holidays and often the weekend this increases even more, as their household tasks are doubled. For example, after routine duties, women have to cook the food, sweep, wash dishes and clothes, along with many other home chores. She has to look after children and other family members, and on holidays and special occasions women's work increases still more as almost all male members stay at home. The men being at home puts more pressure on the women as the men need food and tea served from time to time, and occasionally there are very busy periods of cooking, cleaning, and attending to guests. Children also need more attention during the holidays. Aside from these household tasks, women are only occasionally allowed to visit temples, or meet relatives or attend marriage ceremonies. Sometimes the women get to relax for a couple of hours in the evening, but it is very rare. Young women and girls are allowed to spend their time studying, watching TV, and on holidays occasionally they can visit temples or relatives' homes, as per their parents' planning, whereas their brothers are allowed to go out with their friends, play football, cricket, and other sports, and sometimes picnic with their friends.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) shared:

We women have to get up very early on important Hindu days. We must get everything prepared for prayers, clean everything, get the children ready, iron clothes, and cook multiples dishes in large quantities. We have to attend to guests, serve them, wash pots again and again until late at night, after which we have to again clean the house. We get to bed late and have only short hours of sleeping. After the end of the holidays or occasion we have to go back to our routine with managing our outdoor job. These holiday activities make us more tired than our daily routine.

Participant (woman aged 18–35) shared:

We women enjoy the changes to our routine work that events like Holi, Dewali, and other traditional events bring, but I personally wish that I may go outside to picnic or travel or visit parents or other relatives. That looks like only a dream to me as during these occasions and celebrations women are burdened with more and more tasks. I consider it a triple job to do home chores, outdoor job, and additional activities with lots of work cooking, cleaning, washing, serving, and looking after the guests. Only elders, males and children enjoy events and occasions, we women just work, work, and work.

2.2.7 Transportation

While travelling in rickshaws and buses, women face sexual harassment and religious discrimination. Hindu women waiting at bus stops are approached by men asking for their mobile phone numbers or for them to go with them. They are touched as they leave the bus and sometimes women from the majority religion refuse to share a seat beside them. People also make objections if Hindu women are seen to be reciting the Hindu prayer, Krishana-Mala (Paternoster), which is often noticeable because prayer beads are used.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) shared:

I and my two neighbours were going to the temple in the evening. One of my neighbours is very dedicated to God Shree Krishana so she was continuously reciting a prayer while holding a Malaa (Paternoster) in her hand. A lady from the majority sitting beside us asked my neighbour, 'What are you doing, you Hindu woman, getting me Napaak [Untidy]? I am in ablution. Go away, sit on another seat, and do whatever you are doing, but leave this seat.' She spoke harshly and when we objected to the lady the bus conductor also instructed us, 'If she has a problem better change the seat and keep calm.'

Participant (woman aged 18–35) shared:

I was travelling in the bus to my home. One seat was empty beside me. One lady from the mainstream religion got on the bus, she saw me and kept on standing. I asked her to sit and she ignored me. I thought she could not hear me so I touched her to grab her attention toward me, so I may ask her to sit. She got angry that I touched her and said: 'What's your problem why did you

touch me? I don't have to sit with you. I am not blind, I can see the empty seat.' And she went away whispering in an angry mood. I felt very embarrassed and could not say anything.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) shared:

During travelling in auto-rickshaw with my kids to the Sawami-Narain temple, wearing cultural dress along with Sindoor, Bindiya, etc., the driver started gazing at me in his mirrors again and again. When I angrily reacted and asked him to stop gazing at me, he started harassing me verbally, saying, 'It's unbelievable, Hindu women can be so beautiful. Will you marry me? I already have three wives and all are living very happily, you can be my fourth wife and I will keep you more happy than the others.' This made me more insecure and I shouted to stop Rickshaw and got off it.

When Hindu women travel far out of the city towards other districts and stop at a *dabba* (small restaurant), they are often asked to use their own cups/glasses for buying tea. While this is a problem experienced by Hindus of all classes, it is more commonly experienced by poor Hindus who are more distinguishable by their clothing. Educated Hindu women often wear clothing closer to that of the women from the Muslim majority, and therefore it is not always obvious that they are Hindu. However, this is a vulnerability that poor Hindu women cannot avoid.

2.2.8 Women expected to conform to particular roles, including within employment

Participants were asked if there were particular roles, including in employment, to which Hindu women were expected to conform. Table I shows that the majority of participants felt that there were.

I. Are there particular roles within your context that women from your religious background are expected to conform to, including certain forms of employment?

Table I				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	08	00	02	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	11	01	00	00

Group-W-2 (36–60)	10	02	00	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	08	03	01	00

Source: Author's own.

Women are frequently targeted for their gender, whether they belong to the majority or minority. However, women from religious minorities have it even harder; their expected roles are constructed as a combination of traditional expectations and social values. Both working women and those who are housewives are expected to perform perfectly, meeting all traditional and cultural norms. They must be soft and polite, emotional, accommodating, nurturing towards men, look after children, cook, carry out home chores, and be responsible for maintaining the family and community honour. Outside the home, communal life generally rotates around the activities of men. Working women are responsible for all household work alongside their jobs. Many do piecework for very low wages in their homes, or are engaged in some form of salaried work in the labour force. Their earnings are generally recorded as part of the family income.

Hindu women of different sub-communities are expected to fulfil certain jobs which traditionally their communities have been following from elders for decades, like women in the Hindu Marwari Community. Various Hindu communities are found in Pakistan. They speak a variety of languages such as Sindhi, Aer, Dhatki, Gera, Goaria, Jandavra, Kabutra, Loarki, Marwari, and Gujrati. There are many castes of Hinduism living in Pakistan – for instance, Bheel, Kohli, and Meghwar – and each community has their own language, culture, and tradition which are distinct from the other Hindu communities. They also have different professional backgrounds as per their demographical and geographical ways of living. In Pakistan, Hindu Scheduled Castes number around 40. The Marwari Community who participated in this study belong to a very poor class. They speak the Marwari language and most of their ancestors made their living by selling dried fruits, which they understand well. They know how to work buying and selling the dried fruit, and that is why most of the women from this community do this job.

Selling dried fruits on the roadsides of different public and market areas is therefore an ancestral occupation and the women cannot choose other jobs. A benefit of this work is that many of the women from the community work together and are therefore less restricted in their mobility when they are in groups. A negative aspect of following the work of their ancestors is that women are not allowed to change jobs or gain an education. If they try to change jobs they are accused of disturbing domestic and married life throughout the community.

Participant (woman aged 18–35) expressed:

I wanted to study but there was no system of girls' education. My mother sent me to school up to third standard, then discontinued my school and got me married when I was 17. Now I am thinking if I was educated maybe I would be able to do a job of teaching or any other, but I know if I tried I would be blamed as disobedient by my family, community, and community's elders. They would accuse me of disturbing domestic and married life of our community's women. We women cannot even go for any other odd job.

The participants who were not part of the Marwari Community also had specific roles to conform to as they belonged to different sub-communities. They shared that their working women mostly work as maids for cleaning, washing, and sweeping houses in different areas of Karachi city. In other sub-communities, almost all the men and women are employed as sweepers in government and private sectors, while some women mostly labour in factories, carrying out the tasks of packing and cutting. Some work from home cutting leather pieces, sewing gloves, packing, and other odd jobs.

Young Hindu women are allowed to work as a beautician or a tutor, for example; jobs that require no need to go outdoors and can be done from home. In the case of girls who are highly educated, they can work only as a teacher in schools within the surrounding residential area.

2.2.9 Worship and religious practices

Participants were asked three questions about the extent to which poor Hindu women are able to access religious worship and perform religious practices.

J. Can you/women from your community easily go to places of worship?

Table J				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	07	05	00	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	10	02	00	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	09	03	00	00

Group-H-M (18–60)	10	02	00	00
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Source: Author's own.

K. Can you/women from your community easily perform prayer activities compared to men of your community?

Table K				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	05	03	02	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	06	06	00	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	04	07	00	01
Group-H-M (18–60)	08	03	00	01

Source: Author's own.

L. Can you/the women in your community easily perform prayer activities compared to women of the majority religion?

Table L				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	03	06	01	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	03	09	00	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	01	10	00	01
Group-H-M (18–60)	04	08	00	00

Source: Author's own.

As shown in Table J, the majority of women aged 18–60 and the men felt that Hindu women can freely perform their religious rituals in their homes and visit the temples of their compounds to worship. Women worship more than men; however, a woman cannot go to any of the main temples outside of their area without being accompanied by a man or a family member. Some older women are permitted to go by themselves.

However, 42 per cent of girls felt that they were not able to worship freely, which reflects the fact that young women and girls are restricted. These young women and girls are restricted by their own community due to fears of abduction and forced conversion. Young women and girls can only visit temples and worship if they are accompanied by a Hindu adult, usually a man.

In Hindu communities, people live in compounds with other Hindus. Each house has a very small *thapna* (temple), and often there is also a small temple for combined prayers in the locality. However, this communal temple can make them vulnerable to attacks. Sometimes ancient Hindu residential areas are attacked and their temples are destroyed. These attacks may be carried out by religious extremists, although sometimes they are the work of builders. For example, in August 2020, 'a pre-Partition Hindu temple was allegedly demolished by a builder' despite the fact that the builder had guaranteed that he would not destroy it. Residents believe he took advantage of the Covid-19 pandemic when people were not visiting the temple (Mandhro 2020).

As shown in Table L, 72 per cent of participants across all FGDs felt that poor Hindu women did not have the same freedom to perform prayer activities as Muslim women. The majority of Muslim women can freely celebrate their own religious activities, like Ramadan (Saheri, Iftari), Majlis, Naat-Khuawani, preaching, and Holy-Book recitation in public places. However, Hindu women can perform the equivalent only in their homes and within the compound temple premises. Muslim women are able to access prayer spaces within various public areas – such as shopping malls, hospitals, and their workplaces – whereas these spaces are not provided for Hindu women. On specific religious occasions and prayers when Hindu females wear more customary dress than they would in their day-to-day lives – for example, by applying *Tilak* and *Teeka* (religious symbols on forehead) – they are mocked even more by the majority people.

Table K shows a split in views about the extent to which poor Hindu women can perform prayer activities as easily as Hindu men. Generally, the younger the women, the more they felt they were as able as Hindu men to freely practise prayers. This is interesting as girls and young women tend to be more restricted in their ability to access worship places. However, more men may have agreed that women can practise as easily as them because they also face restrictions. Hindu men also face troubles throughout religious activities, like being stopped from bathing before sunset in the sea or river, while the majority males offer their prayers in mosques safely before sunset.

Participant (woman aged 36–60), shared that Hindu males also face trouble when, during festivals, they go to offer religious rituals:

I live in compound where there is a small Hanuman temple. A Hindu man went there to worship, and he was teased by men from the religious majority living in the surrounding area. When he countered their teasing he was beaten and forced to leave.

2.2.10 Forced conversions of Hindu women and girls

Participants were asked three questions related to the forced conversion of Hindu women. The first of these was simply to better understand if the Hindu community has experienced cases of forced conversion. As shown in Table M, the answer across all FGDs was overwhelmingly ‘yes’.

M. Have there been cases of forced conversion?

Table M				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	10	00	00	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	09	01	02	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	11	01	00	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	12	00	00	00

Source: Author's own.

While Pakistan is a democratic state, Hindu women face inequality on the basis of both gender and religion. Pakistan's constitution acknowledges equality between males and females: Article 25 states that 'There shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex'. Despite all women in Pakistan being vulnerable to gender-based discrimination, the violence that women from minorities face is gender and religious discrimination combined. The Hindu women and girls in Sindh are harassed physically and mentally, largely abused domestically, mistreated generally, and many have been kidnapped, raped, and pushed to forcibly convert to Islam, often through forced marriages. The Pakistani constitution is itself very discriminating. It states that if a person converts to another religion from Islam, he or she is considered a blasphemer; however, minorities are permitted to be converted into Islam. The state does not support that women vulnerable to abduction do not remain without protection, and that police officers who

refuse to file a First Information Report (FIR, which should be filed as soon as a crime is alleged to have been committed) in cases of rape and abduction involving religious minorities be sanctioned, for the protection of Hindu women.

In 2016, the Government of Sindh passed 'The Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill' in order to overcome forced religious conversions. The Bill was proposed in 2015 by Mr Nand Kumar Goklani, the parliamentarian of Sindh from the political party Pakistan Muslim League, and would have set the precedent of a five-year punishment for perpetrators and three years for the facilitators of such conversions (Mugheri 2016). Mr Goklani presented the Bill in response to the high rate of forced conversions of young Hindu women living in Sindh province; however, soon after it was passed:

Jamaat-e-Islami leader Sirajul Haq held a meeting with PPP leader Asif Ali Zardari and conveyed the grievances of religious parties and the Council of Islamic Ideology. Soon after, the PPP leadership conveyed a message through the chief minister (CM) to the then Sindh Governor Justice (Retd) Saeeduzaman Siddiqui, asking him not to ratify the bill (*Global Village Space* 2019).

Consequently, Governor Saeeduzaman Siddiqui challenged various clauses within the Bill, including the idea that non-Muslim girls were too young to make a decision about converting to Islam. The Bill was presented to parliament again in 2019, having had all of the clauses that raised objections in 2016 eliminated; however, the Bill was dismissed after it was put to the vote (*ibid.*). Consequently, there is no law in place to protect women and girls from religious minorities against forced conversions.

Being a minority within a minority puts Hindu women in a very vulnerable position. Hindu females have always been targeted by dominating men from the religious majority. Hindus live in high-density communities in Sindh province and the greatest issue of concern to them is forced conversions and marriages of Hindu women and young girls to Muslim men. It is common for Hindu females to be abducted from their homes, tortured, threatened, and forced to convert to Islam. They are then married off to Muslim men who declare that the conversion and marriage were carried out with the girl's own willingness. Hindu men are not forcibly converted; this is a threat that only Hindu women are confronted with, and it leads to further victimisation. Ackerman (2018) wrote an extensive report on behalf of the Commonwealth Institute for Freedom of Religion and Belief (CIFoRB), outlining the forced conversions and forced marriages of Hindu girls in Sindh province. He describes how 'in most cases the victim is abducted and is then subjugated to sustained emotional and physical abuse often involving threats of violence

towards their loved ones' (*ibid.*: 1). Ackerman also explains how perpetrators can carry out the abductions and subsequent forced conversions with relative impunity, as the police tend to turn a blind eye. Poor Hindu girls are at particular risk of abduction and forced conversion because of the vulnerable position their jobs put them in. Many poor Hindus are members of the Dalit caste and work as bonded labourers, leaving their daughters open to the whims of the landlord their parents are bonded to (*ibid.*).

During the FGD, the men seemed helpless to the harsh reality of forced conversion, which has been going on for decades. In recent years, forced conversions of minority girls and women to Islam has risen to an unprecedented level. The Hindu women and girls are no longer safe: these threats keep the community worried, and therefore the men restrict girls from interacting with people from the majority. The men refuse to allow the young women in their community to access higher education. Sometimes men are asked for their teenage daughter to be converted as Muslim men believe this will earn them a place in Heaven; therefore, cases of the abduction, forced conversion, and forced marriage of Hindu girls have become common in Sindh.

The cases that get highlighted in the media and on social media become a rallying cry for activists and civil society, who raise their voices for justice. However, many cases go unheard and unreported, especially in rural areas and villages in districts like Mirpurkhas, Tharparkar, and Umerkot in Sindh. These areas are densely populated by the Hindu population and many villages have no access to electricity, phones, and the internet. They are not connected to the city areas. Here, violence against women goes unreported, including forced conversions of young Hindu women and girls. Usually the conversions are misrepresented as love and affection of the girls towards Muslim men, but of course the communities challenge this by asking why a girl would convert if she was in love, and why would she get married when she is only 13 or 14 years old? Families of victims keep shouting, crying, begging for justice, and asking the government to get their daughters back, but nothing happens. Even many activists raise their voices in support of victims' families and the media highlights this issue, but after a few weeks or months there is silence and the matter remains unresolved.

Mr Lal, 50-year-old father of Reena and Raveena, who were converted and then married to Muslim men in the Ghotki district of Sindh, asked for mercy and kept crying for his daughters. His video went viral on every channel in Sindh, in which he was helplessly slapping himself while crying outside the Ghotki police station, asking the police to do something to recover his daughters (*OpIndia* 2019). Reportedly over 2,000 Hindu men and women from nearby villages and towns joined him in demanding justice for Reena and Raveena, blocking the highway for three consecutive days to bring it to the attention

of the Prime Minister of Pakistan. But finally, the girls appeared and stated they had converted themselves. This happens in almost all cases.

In most cases, it has been observed that the victim’s family files a FIR against the abduction of their young woman or girl, at the local police station. This usually takes time, and meanwhile, police face pressure from a source close to the kidnappers. They then file a counter FIR on behalf of the girl, condemning the girl’s family for harassing an intentional marriage and conversion and going against the girl’s will. In most cases the girl remains in the custody of the kidnapper while the judicial proceeding is carried out, based on the girl’s statement that she knowingly converted and willingly married. Once the girl is in the custody of the abductor she may be subjected to rape and sexual violence. Later on, the girl’s family may find out that they have been forced into prostitution, sold to another man, and/or become a victim of human trafficking. The parents cannot communicate with their daughter before or during the court proceedings, so it is no surprise that the families always seem helpless. Men just ask for mercy from the people and institutions for justice to get their females back to them.

N. Do men and women both face the same issue of forced conversion and forced marriage?

Table N				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	03	05	02	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	06	05	00	01
Group-W-2 (36–60)	05	07	00	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	06	06	00	00

Source: Author’s own.

Despite the anecdotal evidence given in the discussions (see quotes below) that Hindu women experience more trouble than their men when it comes to forced conversion, only 50 per cent of participants across the FGDs felt that Hindu men do not face the same issues around forced conversion as Hindu women. Despite this, anecdotes tell us that Muslim men pursue Hindu females through bullying, harassment, and marriage proposals, sometimes offering money to women working outside the home. If a woman denies friendship to the man, he will often get angry and become threatening. Women

have to ignore these men’s intolerable behaviour in order to continue their everyday tasks. Muslim men also try to bribe Hindu females to convert to their religion by offering them a luxurious life. It is also observed that the majority of Muslim men who marry Hindu girls leave them within a few months or sell them to other people.

When Hindu females suddenly go missing, the other community members tend to pass judgement on the family, suggesting that the girl or young woman chose to run away with the Muslim man. They accuse her of being of ‘bad character’. Participants shared that after months of a female being missing, sometimes the community came to know about the dead bodies of missing females in hospitals. The communities mostly refused to accept the bodies belonged to them in order to try and preserve the community’s honour. In earlier decades, such cases were not discussed openly by Hindu people, or reported to the police, as the family (and consequently, the wider community) dreaded any clash with the majority people.

Participant Aami (woman aged 36–60) sobbingly expressed:

I am also a mother of victim girl, my 15 years old daughter Vidya, studied in grade seven, has been missing since May 20th 2019. She went to school and never came back. It’s going to be a year but police and government could not recover her. We don’t know where is she, whether she is alive or not. Life has become hell, nobody can feel mine and my family’s sadness.

Aami’s situation was reported in the Pakistani media (*The International News* 2019). The Hindu community believes that Vidya has been kidnapped, and in response held a protest in July 2019 against forced conversions, calling on the government to protect their women and girls. The protests also included members of the Christian and Sikh communities in a moment of solidarity against the abductions of minority women and girls (*ibid.*). Law enforcement agencies were accused of failing to take the necessary action to find Vidya in the month and a half since she went missing.

O. In such cases, how does your community react towards women?

Table O				
Groups	Harshly	By restricting them	With more care	By being more protective

Group-H-G (14–17)	02	06	00	02
Group-W-1 (18–35)	01	08	00	03
Group-W-2 (36–60)	02	08	00	02
Group-H-M (18–60)	00	03	04	05

Source: Author's own.

As a result of the occurrence of forced conversions, participants were asked how the community acts towards poor Hindu women and girls – whether the community reaction is generally harsh, comes in the form of restrictions, is caring, and the interest it has in the protection of girls and women. The answers are not necessarily mutually exclusive (for example, the community could act harshly with the intention of protecting the girls and women); however, this data helps to give a general sense of how the community has been changed by the occurrence of forced conversions. Sadly, only 9 per cent of participants (all men) felt that the community acted with more care. Instead, 54 per cent of participants felt the community acted by restricting women and girls. This was the majority answer for women of all ages.

An example of the situations that have led to this community response is the fact that Hindu female students have been solicited to convert to Islam by their Muslim teachers, colleagues, and classmates, as converting a non-Muslim to Islam is seen as a good deed. Due to such incidents, parents and community members behave more strictly towards their girls and keep an eye on them during every outdoor activity. Hindu parents trust their daughters, but their fear makes their girls depressed and sad.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

Recently, in my community, two cases occurred in rural area of Sindh. The girls were kidnapped, converted forcibly and then married with Muslim men. Their parents were threatened to keep silent, and later on it was declared that the girls had been willingly converted into Muslims and married to Muslim men. Even a few Hindu boys had converted themselves willingly into Islamic religion, afterward they wanted to be back but could not be.

Participant (man aged 18–60) shared:

One Hindu couple in my community left home due to a disagreement of families for their love marriage. They were caught by some strangers who misguided them into conversion to Islam and offered all the benefits. Later on, they wanted to come back into their community, but due to their new religion they were unable to do so.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) said:

One girl named Payal, who used to visit the temple often, was kidnapped and converted to Islam. Soon after her conversion was announced willingly, even I found her very devoted towards worship and practising religious activities at the temple.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

I have studied at Christian school and was asked by my teacher to convert into Christianity.

She explained that it was a private Christian school where the management and most of the staff belonged to the Christian faith. At the time, she was in 7th standard and she would fast according to her religion. Once she was late to school three times, and when she expressed the reason for being late (i.e. fasting) the teacher said: 'Why don't you convert to Christianity?' The girl just gave a smile and said nothing.

2.2.11 Faith abandonment

Participants were asked if they ever felt it might be necessary to convert to another religion in order to feel safe. Table P shows that the majority of girls did not know the answer to this; however, the majority of women aged 18–60 stated that they have never felt it might be necessary. This is interesting given the severe and tragic nature of the issues the women have raised and discussed throughout this study. It is unlikely, as captured in the quotes throughout, that these women believe that their religion does not have a role in their discrimination. Consequently, this suggests that either religion and/or faith is not something these women are willing to give up in exchange for safety, perhaps seeing it as integral to their identity, or they feel they would still be marked out for discrimination in some way even if they changed religion (perhaps because people would always know they were born into a different faith). Conversely, only 42 per cent of men felt that that abandoning their faith would ever be necessary.

P. Have you ever felt it might be necessary for you/members of your Hindu community to abandon your faith and convert to another religion, in order to feel safe?

Table P				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	02	00	07	01
Group-W-1 (18–35)	00	07	04	01
Group-W-2 (36–60)	03	06	03	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	04	05	02	01

Source: Author's own.

Participants said that they had heard news of a few areas where Hindus had abandoned their faith and converted to Islam in order to gain benefits for their families and move themselves out of extreme poverty. However, the participants had never observed such cases within their own sub-communities.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

Sometimes people convert for their own and their families' benefits. I heard of an incident from my community members in Umerkot Sindh District where a man who was very poor and in search of a job was asked to leave his religious faith and convert him and his family to Islam. So the whole family converted and no longer had to worry about trying to survive without a job.

Participant Vishal (man aged 18–60) shared:

Recently in District Ghotki Dharki, a family from Bheel community has been converted into Islam religion due to poverty and no resources of income in Covid-19.

There have been reports of other instances of conversions prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic, similar to that described in the quote above. In August, Abi-Habib and ur-Rehman (2020) reported in the *New York Times* that in June dozens of Hindu families had converted to Islam on the promise of jobs or land. Covid-19 has ravaged Pakistan's economy and Hindu community leaders say that newfound economic pressures are to

blame for the sudden increase in conversions. Subsequently, this suggests that poor Hindu women and their families are now more vulnerable to forced conversion and abandonment of their faith than ever before. Muhammad Aslam Sheikh, whose name was Sawan Bheel until June when he converted to Islam with his family, stated that 'what we are seeking is social status, nothing else' (*ibid.*). This also intersects with another theme that is explored later in this paper – the fact that poor Hindu people in Pakistan are not able to access financial support from Islamic charities, even during Ramadan, when Muslims make donations known as Zakat to those worse off than themselves. Hindus are not seen as worthy beneficiaries, although families like Mr Sheikh's will now have the opportunity to claim financial support from Islamic charities, as Muslims. This rise in the conversion of families for financial reasons is weakening an already very small Hindu population.

2.2.13 Threats within family and community

This research shows that the life of poor women from religious minorities in different sociocultural environments is very hard. Women have not been given equal rights to men. Being a woman is a challenge, symbolised by her care-taking responsibilities, being subordinate to the men and family elders, the sacrificing of her feelings and needs, and compromising for others. The norms assigned to women by men and the traditional (male) religious authorities mean that poor Hindu women face multi-marginalisation. Women are expected to uphold the traditional and cultural practices and values within the community and society. It is women who suffer the most injustice *within* their communities, because the men have the monopoly on defining the norms and boundaries for them; women's lives are governed by men's interpretations of the community's norms.

Hindu women expressed that when they see women from other religious groups, particularly from the majority, they feel even more marginalised. They feel like the men in their community discriminate against them based on their gender, and this is mirrored by the behaviour of the men from the majority religion who discriminate against them based on both gender and religion. As already explored, poor Hindu men restrict poor Hindu women in their mobility, how they spend their time, and determine the clothes they wear, and all these factors can lead them to suffer periods of depression. Even where it appears that women have freedom, this is still only to a certain degree. For example, where women are allowed by their community to be mobile and go out to work, if they are even slightly late returning, they are highly likely to experience aggression from the

men in their communities. The men do not experience this if they come home late from work.

All the young Hindu girl participants articulated that they have no freedom to get an education or for choosing their occupations. Their clothes are selected by their parents, based on the attitudes of their community, especially the male elders. They expressed how they are not allowed to 'live freely'. As already explored, they cannot go out alone, even to the local temple. They felt they are always judged and not treated equally or fairly.

2.2.12 Forced changes as a marginalised group

The marginalised groups face a number of challenges within Pakistani society. Sometimes this marginalisation is a result of state policy and sometimes it is due to influential individuals pushing traditional and cultural Islamic practices which the minority groups are expected to follow as much as the majority. This makes the communities that are marginalised by their religion feel vulnerable and hopeless: in a democracy, people are supposed to be treated as equal citizens and be given equal opportunities. In some cases, this is achieved for the minorities through quotas, to make up for the shortcomings they face and to lift them to the same level as those in the mainstream, so they can enjoy the fruits of the economy and peace of mind. However, they still face extensive discriminatory attitudes and actions which lead to misery, deprivation, and disconnection from wider society. This discrimination takes place across all areas of society: within the justice system, within the workplace, in educational institutions, and through the social attitudes and biases of those in the majority faith. Discrimination is faced by Hindu communities whether they live in urban or rural areas. Hindus face attacks on their places of worship, and threats of kidnapping, rape, forced conversion, forced marriage, harassment, and murder, and young Hindu people are discriminated against in educational and employment opportunities.

Participant Ravi (man aged 18–60) stated:

Every democratic state has a legal and moral responsibility to ensure the protection of marginalised communities from individuals or organisations that are trying to harm us. Article 36, which details the Protection of Minorities, says that the State shall safeguard the legitimate rights and interests of minorities, including their due representation in the Federal and Provincial Services.

The following are some of the changes that the Hindu communities in Pakistan have made in an attempt to avoid this extensive discrimination, to the detriment of the communities themselves and particularly to the detriment of Hindu women and girls who hold so much of the community's 'honour':

- Hindus are the oldest inhabitants of Sindh province. Many Hindus did not migrate to India during Partition because they wanted to live on the land where their roots are. However, many Hindu families have recently travelled away from Pakistan in order to escape religious persecution, particularly the challenges in educating their children and the threats to their women of forced conversion.
- Recently, a few Hindu communities have allowed their women to change their cultural dress to follow that of the majority. They have allowed the discontinuation of clothes that are worn for symbolic purposes – such as Sindoor, Mangal-Sootar, and Bindiya – in routine life when they go out in public. This is in order to avoid negative experiences, as the stress experienced by Hindu women because of their religious identity is increasing.
- Hindu communities avoid worshipping with loud chanting (*Arti*), reciting verses, and large celebrations if their festivals fall during Ramadan and Ashoora (Muslim Holy Festival), in respect of the majority faith.
- Because Hindus are denied renting homes in many areas of Karachi, they have had to accept being restricted to only living in areas where there is a dense Hindu population.
- Hindu communities heavily restrict the mobility of their young women and girls because of the threat of abduction, forced conversion, and forced marriage.

2.2.13 Financial crises and poor women's responsibilities

Respondents were questioned about how poor Hindu women access support in times of financial crisis. They were also asked how they access support when they face day-to-day issues that squeeze their finances and in any times of exceptional conflict. They explained that the marginalised Hindu communities suffer poverty, and even when women do work to cope with financial crises, the jobs they do mean that they mostly have to rely on daily wages. Occasionally they earn enough to plan ahead, but mostly they have to survive hand to mouth.

Women from religious minorities do not receive any *Wazifa* (stipends) from the Pakistan Bait-ul-Mal (PBM, the treasury). The PBM is an autonomous body that significantly contributes towards poverty alleviation through its various services focused on meeting the needs of the poorest of the poor. It provides assistance to those who are destitute:

widows, orphans, the infirm, and other people in need, as per eligibly criteria approved by the Bait-ul-Mal Board. However, religious minorities are not covered by it. If a Hindu woman asks their manager/owner for *Zakwat* or *Sadqa* money (funds by Muslims) to help, they are refused on the grounds that it is not available for Hindus.

Islam has a system called Zakat (funds for the needy). During the month of Ramadan, in particular, Muslims donate Zakat to needy Muslims. During this research, poor Hindu women shared that they are also very poor, to the point where they can hardly meet the basic needs of their families, but during Ramadan when they ask Muslims to help them through Zakat they are usually refused, as many Muslims consider it to be only for poor and needy Muslims.

Participant (woman aged 18–35) said:

Last year in the month of Holy Ramadan I was badly in need of some money. I requested to Muslim fellows who work in the surrounding area of my work to donate me some Zakat. One of them said: 'Zakat stands only for Muslims not for Hindus. Why do you not ask to your Hindu people to help you instead of asking to Muslims?'

Participant (woman aged 36–60) said:

We are very poor people, sometimes it's very hard to manage routine expenses. Due to that I could not pay three months' school fees for my children and their exams were about to start. I was pressurised by school management to clear the dues, otherwise my children will not be allowed to be part of the examinations. I asked the school's management if there is any Zakat money to help the poor students and the management replied, 'No', saying there is no such system and we also cannot ask anyone for Zakat money because Zakat is only to help the needy Muslims.

Economic insecurity and having no savings to fall back on lead to negative experiences for Hindu women. Having an insufficient income makes their survival very difficult, as they cannot meet the needs of rent, food, children's school fees, and other necessities. This creates pressure on a daily basis. Sometimes women have to borrow money from other people to cope with their situations. Their poverty influences everything in their life, especially because the required nutrition and education for children cannot be afforded.

Participants stated that the government is responsible for their vulnerability in times of soaring inflation. Their income is limited and expenses have been increased day in, day out. Daily wages and salaries in the private sector are very low. Participants believed that

if the government owned its responsibility towards meeting the needs of all of its citizens, they might be able to run their lives much better.

Men contribute only a set amount to the family without realising the actual required needs. They place the responsibility for managing the home, jobs, children’s responsibilities, and household tasks onto their women’s shoulders. From childhood, Hindu girls are expected to be subordinate to their elders, especially men, and are instructed to follow their mothers and other women in the community who carry out all of the hard, menial tasks. Therefore, women have to manage all of these responsibilities alongside all the other pressures coming from both the community and outside society that are discussed throughout this paper.

2.2.14 Celebrations and important occasions

Participants were asked if poor Hindu women felt able to mark important religious occasions freely in comparison to Muslims.

Q. Are poor Hindu women able to mark important occasions freely within their religious calendar compared to those of the majority religion?

Table Q				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	02	01	07	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	03	08	00	01
Group-W-2 (36–60)	02	07	03	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	08	00	04	00

Source: Author’s own.

As Table Q shows, the majority of women aged 18–60 feel they cannot celebrate religious occasions as freely as members of the majority religion, Islam. There are potentially two aspects to this. Firstly, the important occasions like Holi and Diwali are not celebrated in the way poor Hindu women would desire because of poverty. Their economic circumstances never allow them to carry out the full celebration they would like. Women said they wished to make these occasions special for their children and

family, but they are never able to afford to do so. Even if they were able to, they themselves could not enjoy the shopping, preparation, decoration, etc. compared to how they see women of the majority religion celebrating, due to their extensive responsibilities. Sometimes Hindu women work extra time over the celebration period, even with all their additional responsibilities, so they may buy clothes and shoes for their children.

Secondly, minority people cannot enjoy festivities because of religious discrimination. Muslims get three or more holidays on their Eid days, given by the government, but on Hindu occasions their communities have to work. Taking time off makes them vulnerable to being terminated from their jobs, and daily wage workers have to survive without earnings if they take leave. Regardless of whether the reason for being restricted in celebrating is due to economic exclusion or religious discrimination – or an intersection of the two – it is clear that women felt they did not have the same freedoms as Muslim women from the majority. Conversely, the majority of men felt poor Hindu women could celebrate religious occasions in the same way as Muslims.

Hindu celebrations can become gloomy when Muslims make objections to the occasions. For example, when children play with colours during Holi festival and with *patakhy* (firecrackers) as part of the Diwali festival they are restricted to their houses and within temple premises. Usually schools and board exams are conducted on dates that fall within these Hindu festivals, so most Hindu students are busy preparing for their exams and therefore cannot be part of the celebrations or enjoy the occasions.

Participant (woman aged 18–36) shared:

When I asked my school's headmistress for a day leave for Shiv Ratri [fasting for a whole day and night and worship festival], she denied me, and taunted me by saying, 'You are not fasting for us. If you feel difficulties to manage your fasting occasion then you should change your religion or leave this job'.

2.2.15 Hiding and acceptance

Participants were asked three questions about the extent to which poor Hindu women hide markers of their religion when they are out in public and to what extent this benefits them.

R. Do poor Hindu women feel they are more likely to be accepted when they hide public manifestations of their faith?

Table R				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14-17)	04	06	00	00
Group-W-1 (18-35)	05	06	01	00
Group-W-2 (36-60)	07	05	00	00
Group-H-M (18-60)	06	03	03	00

Source: Author's own.

S. Do you/women from your community hide their religious identities and appearance?

Table S				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14-17)	05	03	02	00
Group-W-1 (18-35)	08	03	00	01
Group-W-2 (36-60)	11	01	00	00
Group-H-M (18-60)	05	07	00	00

Source: Author's own.

T. If you/they do, does this benefit you/them publicly?

Table T				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14-17)	05	04	00	01
Group-W-1 (18-35)	08	04	00	00

Group-W-2 (36–60)	12	00	00	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	05	07	00	00

Source: Author's own.

Despite only 47 per cent of women and girls expressing that they would more likely be accepted if they hid manifestations of their faith when out in public (Table R), 71 per cent of these same women and girls stated that women in their community hide their religious identities and appearance when they are out in public (Table S). Additionally, 74 per cent of them felt it benefits them publicly to do so (Table T). This suggests that even if it is not acceptance that is gained, women and girls recognise that there is some benefit to them by hiding their religious identities when out in public.

As already discussed, Hindu women are expected to wear traditional clothing, a symbol of their religious faith. Being thus identified as Hindu, the women experience harassment and threats to their safety when they are in public. Despite wearing traditional clothing being an important part of females expressing their religion, a few Hindu girls have started wearing an abaya and scarf (the casual clothing of Muslim women and girls) for safety purposes and to make mobility more comfortable while going to school. This prevents them from being recognised as Hindu and being bothered by others.

A small number of women from the Hindu community have stopped wearing their cultural clothing as part of their everyday routine, especially working women. They do not wear Sindoor, Bindiya, or Mangal-Sootar, and even remove *Tilak* (symbol on forehead) before leaving the temple to go back home.

Participant (woman aged 18–35) explained that if anyone was suspicious and asked about her religion:

We avoid sharing and sometimes we tell a lie, denying our belonging of Hinduism.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

I went to the Bazaar [market] with my mother. After shopping we stopped at 'Sharbat Wala' [juice cart] and asked for two glasses of Sharbat. The dealer stared at my mother's dress and refused to share glasses with Hindus.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

We have started wearing abaya and scarf [casual clothing that Muslim women wear outdoors], because this makes our mobility comfortable and acceptable while we are going to school, markets, and other places. We avoid judgmental comments and bullying.

Conversely, just over 50 per cent of men did not think that women in their community hide their religious identities (Table S) and the same number did not think it would benefit them in public to do so (Table T). This, as with data for previous questions, suggests that Hindu men are not as aware of the situations Hindu women face when out in public.

2.2.16 Health-care services

When asked about access to health-care services, almost none of the participants reported experiencing discrimination because of being Hindu.

U. Do you/women in your community face any discrimination due to religion when trying to access health care?

Table U				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	00	00	07	03
Group-W-1 (18–35)	00	10	02	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	02	09	01	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	00	05	07	00

Source: Author's own.

As Table U shows, the majority of women aged 18–35 denied facing any discrimination due to their religion when accessing health care. The majority of girls and men did not know the answer to this. Instead, they all said that they had experienced discrimination and lack of access as other poor people do. They added that sometimes lower-class staff working in the hospital harassed them. This is an interesting observation, and further research comparing their experiences with those of poor Muslim women would be helpful. Conclusions could then be drawn about whether or not their religion plays a part in their discrimination, rather than solely attributing it only to their economic exclusion.

Pakistan is a developing country and the lack of access to basic health-care services reflects this. Its health-care system comprises both a private and public sector. The general state and quality of public services is very poor compared to private hospitals, which provide much better services. However, private hospitals are not affordable to the lower middle class and poor people, who instead rely on government health-care services. In urban areas access to health-care clinics and facilities is not a problem, but Hindu women still find it difficult for their basic health needs to be met because of religious discrimination. Religious minorities have difficulty in accessing proper health-care services because if their ID card² states their religion as something other than 'Muslim', the individual is not eligible to receive government aid. Although it is not mentioned in any policy or law, usually people discriminate when a person's ID card shows they are not Muslim. Due to this, people working in hospitals or involved in funding or aid distribution who do not want to help non-Muslims will use the ID card as the reason for not doing so (Church in Chains 2012).

Two participants (women aged 36–60), Savita and Banu, both experienced similar incidents on different days and at different times. When they visited the public hospital they were denied free medicines at the medicine counter, while people of the religious majority were provided with them. Banu was stopped filling in the form for the issuance of free medicine when she showed her national identity card at the counter. When they both asked why they were refused, they were informed, 'These are not for you people, it's only for Muslims'.

Women also suffer a lack of nutrition and insufficient sustenance, especially during pregnancy, as no special attention or care is provided to them. Working women also have to continue their labouring work during pregnancy as there is no alternative or safety net for them

2.2.17 Hindu women's engagement with local and national authorities

Table V				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	00	04	06	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	00	10	02	00

² Everyone in Pakistan has to carry a national identity card, which signifies their religion.

Group-W-2 (36–60)	03	05	04	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	08	04	00	00

Source: Author's own.

Table V shows that 56 per cent of women and girls stated that women in their community had never engaged with local or national authorities. The high number of girls who did not know the answer to this is unsurprising, given the lack of opportunities for young women to engage in politics. However, three women aged 36–60 said that women in their community had engaged with local or national authorities, although what form that engagement took or who it was with is not known. Conversely, 67 per cent of men stated that women in their community had engaged with local or national authorities.

Pakistan has small religious minorities compared to many other marginalised groups which comprise a more significant proportion of the population. The present local government system has struggled to accommodate the subdivisions of marginalised groups in the society, so quota-based appointments have been created and now all provincial local government laws allocate reserved seats for religious minorities, including women.

Reserved seats are contested directly at the lowest level of local government. In Sindh province, there is an abundance of political parties vying for the reserved seats. The reserved seats for religious minorities in Sindh are always filled with Hindu males. The Hindu women are never selected in the provincial assembly, nor in the national. Poor Hindu women of Scheduled Castes, in particular, have never been part of the provincial assembly. History was made in the Government of Sindh in 2018 when one Hindu woman from the elite Hindu class (Mangla Sharma) became a Sindh assembly member. Moreover, Hindu women were even more excited when a poor Hindu woman (Kirshna Kumari Kolhi) was elected Senator, also in 2018. Although there are reserved seats for women in the Pakistan National Assembly, not a single seat was allotted to a Hindu woman. The allocation of reserved seats to selected candidates from religious minorities is only strengthening the hold of dominant political parties over the local government system, as only certain members of religious minorities are selected.

This study found that female participants have never had any experiences with local and national authorities, and had less political awareness than male participants, while some Hindu men have experienced local government as minority councillors. However, the

community felt that these opportunities were only made available to the Hindu men in order to fulfil the minority quota. They had no authority even to deal with any minority issues at the lowest local level.

2.2.18 Harassment and violence

Participants were asked three questions about the extent to which poor Hindu women face violence and harassment.

W. Do you/the women from your community face violence or harassment?

Table W				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14-17)	09	01	00	00
Group-W-1 (18-35)	10	02	00	00
Group-W-2 (36-60)	12	00	00	00
Group-H-M (18-60)	11	01	00	00

Source: Author's own.

X. When this violence is due to religion, do you/the women in your community experience this differently from poor women from the mainstream?

Table X				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14-17)	06	03	00	01
Group-W-1 (18-35)	10	02	00	00
Group-W-2 (36-60)	11	01	00	00
Group-H-M (18-60)	08	04	00	00

Source: Author's own.

Y. Are there particular forms of violence that women from your religious group are typically subjected to?

Table Y				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	05	02	03	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	05	04	03	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	09	02	01	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	10	01	01	00

Source: Author's own.

Tables W and X show that the majority of participants (91 per cent) not only believe that poor Hindu women experience violence and harassment, but also perceive this to be different to the way women from the majority religious group experience violence (76 per cent). Additionally, Table Y shows that the majority of participants (63 per cent) felt there are particular forms of violence that poor Hindu women face. These questions do not differentiate between violence that poor Hindu women experience at the hands of others in their community (such as domestic violence) and violence perpetrated against them because of their religious identity (or religious identity intersecting with their gender and socioeconomic status). This is discussed in more detail below.

Violence against women and girls is shrouded in silence. Hindu women are affected by gender-based violence within communities and society; women are at high risk of manifold forms of interpersonal violence committed against them by family members, classmates, intimate partners, neighbours, and strangers. Women are stopped from highlighting this violence and speaking out in their communities through fear and a real threat of further discrimination. This prevents access to justice, particularly because minorities are denied equal access to essential resources, services, and opportunities for education, employment, and legal redress. Beyond being a violation of their fundamental rights, this deprivation has significant impacts on development outcomes at the individual and community levels.

Many Hindu women and girls are being harassed physically and mentally within their family and community, and are abused, mistreated, kidnapped, and raped. As already discussed, they face threats of forced conversion to Islam and forced marriages. As is clear from the threats identified by the FGDs at the beginning of the research, Hindu women suffer from living in both a male-dominated society and a Muslim-dominated country. Significantly, Hindu women are frightened to speak out in wider society about the violence they experience within their communities as they do not want to draw attention to their already marginalised communities, thereby giving the majority any more excuses to discriminate against them.

Outside of their families and communities, poor Hindu women experience public physical and mental torture in their workplaces due to their religious identity and appearances. They face sexual and verbal harassment and offensive comments from those in the majority religion who often hoot, pass comments, and make jokes about their religious practices. When women try to counter this harassment, they are often threatened. It is worth noting that Muslim women also experience harassment and violence on account of their gender; however, they do not face the double marginality of both their gender and their religious identity.

Participant (woman aged 18–35) shared:

My co-workers made fun that I worship many gods and goddesses saying, 'You Hindus have so many gods and goddesses, many of them carry animals faces of elephant, monkey, etc. You Hindus worship animals, even you do not know who is your god. God can be only one, not thousands!' That man kept laughing on with other fellows. He also said, 'You Hindu women "ap na jisam dikhati ho"[expose your body parts], your stomach and neck, and then accuse innocent males of gazing and sexual harassment, when you do not feel ashamed. Why do you expect others to show respect and not look at your exposed parts?'

Participant (woman aged 18–35) shared:

A policeman snatched my dry fruit bag. When I pleaded with him to give it back, I was pushed and hurled abuses. He was saying, 'Beshram [shameless], Begarat Aurat [bad character woman]' and that a good character woman stays at home rather than working on the footpath.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) shared:

I was beaten by Muslim women and teenagers of their families living in the same compound premise because I asked for some money for their share of the maintenance of the corridor's gutter line. They refused. When I said that their homes are also the part of this premises, a lady slapped me and when I pushed her they all started to beat me and covered my face with dupatta [scarf]. There were 12 women and a few children. They tore up my clothes and also slapped my children. This wasn't the first conflict with them. During an earlier conflict aroused over slaughtering of animals beside our temple in the compound, their males pointed knives at my husband. Policeman was not willing to register my complaint and they even threatened to claim blasphemy if I go again to the police station. They wanted to stop me and my husband from raising our voices against their violence, as they often use violence on other Hindu families living in same compound.

The slaughtering of animals within Hindu compounds has been a disturbing issue for Hindus in the past. Cows are considered to be sacred in Hinduism and Hindus have reported butchers slaughtering animals, including cows, in their compounds. When asked not to do this, like in the case described here, this is often met with violence from the butchers (*The Interntional News* 2006).

Participant (woman aged 18–35) shared:

Hindus get anxious. If the situation in India becomes perilous, like Kashmir and the current problem with CAB-Anti-Muslim Law in India, we Hindus living in Pakistan become afraid of the reactions of the majority people. When Babari Mosque was attacked in India, the situation in our surrounding area became much worse. The majority people got angry and attacked our temples in Pakistan. We Hindus are living in fear and pray for the safety of Muslims living in India, and we curse the Indian extremists who commit such activities which create trouble for all Muslims living in India and Hindus living in Pakistan.

Young Hindu girls also experience sexual harassment and discrimination due to their faith. They face offensive questions in schools and colleges and their Muslim classmates choose to distance themselves from them by not sharing seats and avoiding eating with them.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

During celebration of Diwali festival in my area, kids were exploding firecrackers. This made the neighbours angry and they punished all the kids.

Later on, the community men went to ask for forgiveness and assured the neighbours that they would stop the children from celebrating.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

During a wedding ceremony of my friend's neighbour, one of my friends was abducted by gangsters while travelling to attend the wedding. She was converted into Islam at gunpoint, and they were saying that a beautiful girl cannot be Hindu and one of them she should get to marry her. Her friend's parents were threatened to keep silent.

This participant also talked about the case of Dr Namarta Chandani, who was in her final year of dental college in District Larkana when she was sexually assaulted and murdered (BR Web Desk 2019). Despite clear evidence that she was sexually assaulted, police declared her death to be by suicide. However, her parents claim she was killed because she was a Hindu.

2.2.19 Community response to violence against women

Participants were asked if Hindu men typically respond to the violence perpetrated against Hindu women.

Z. Do men from the same religiously marginalised group typically respond to violence perpetrated against women?

Table Z				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	02	06	03	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	02	10	00	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	04	08	00	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	07	05	00	00

Source: Author's own.

Table Z shows a difference between the views of the women and the views of the men. The majority of women and girls (71 per cent) stated that men from their community do not respond to the violence they experience; however, 58 per cent of men stated that they do. This would probably not have been an easy question for the men to answer, so shame may have influenced the answer they gave. In reality, the quotes suggest that the Hindu community avoid countering those from the majority religion. In instances of violence and harassment against them or other community females, Hindu men become afraid and stop community members from raising their voices, bringing the violence to light, and speaking out. This, as already discussed, prevents Hindu women from accessing justice. The Hindu community itself is very insecure about responding to perpetrators, as they fear that this may cause more trouble for their families. If the perpetrators belong to Hinduism, the community will take strict action against the assailants; but in cases of domestic violence, women are suppressed.

When women raise issues of harassment against Muslim people, the reaction from their community is very harsh towards them: men yell at them and warn them to be more vigilant, or sometimes they restrict their mobility.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) shared:

When I shared the incident with my husband against auto-rickshaw driver who harassed and proposed marriage to me, my husband got aggressive to me, and warned and instructed me not to wear make-up.

2.2.20 State response to violence against women

Participants were asked if the state typically responds to violence perpetrated against Hindu women.

AA. Does the state typically respond to violence perpetrated against women from this religiously marginalised group?

Table AA				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	03	05	04	00

Group-W-1 (18–35)	04	08	00	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	02	08	02	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	05	06	01	00

Source: Author's own.

Table AA shows that 57 per cent of participants felt that the state does not respond to this violence. However, there was an even stronger sense from women aged 18–60 that this was the case, with 64 per cent stating that the state does not respond. Conversely, 42 per cent of men felt that the state does respond to violence against Hindu women.

Violence is not the only element of life as a Hindu in Pakistan that the state does not respond to. Religion turns out to be a dangerous weapon when the majority religious communities attempt to shape culture, social institutions, and the state itself according to their specific belief system. In Pakistan, the role of religion is not a settled issue, which greatly impacts the wisdom, the status, and rights of minorities for internal peace and security. Complex historical and social factors have shaped the communication between religion and politics in Pakistan. The state-building includes fundamental principles such as institutions and systems, citizenship, equality, fundamental rights, and empowerment of all individuals without any discrimination.

In Pakistan, the voice of minorities against violence has been shunned and ignored and the majority's nationalism has muted the voice of minorities. In a fixed religious society, the minority can only narrowly enjoy equality of social or religious status.

It is obvious that whenever any issue occurs, people belonging to the majority or minority look towards the government and law departments for the enforcement of justice, expecting protection for women and religious minorities from violence. However, the Government of Pakistan does not take proper action, even in serious cases of extreme violence, abduction, or forced conversion. Moreover, the police are normally reluctant to register cases and they ignore the victims' families. Even as cases of violence, forced conversion and abductions of Hindu females increase, the state turns a blind eye and does not take the plight of the poor marginalised communities seriously. The criminal justice system is unable to deliver justice for those seeking punishment and this has led to religious minorities not being able to trust their government and its institutions.

Policemen make intermittent visits to market areas and take away goods that are being sold, or they may ask all hawkers to remove their carts from the roadsides. Hawking is a common occupation for poor Hindu women who cannot access properties to set up shops due to religious discrimination and their economic status. Instead, they have to set up illegally on bridges and walkways. One woman who had been working as a dried fruit seller said policemen took away some of their dried fruits and strictly asked them not to work without shops. She said she was treated harshly and faced trouble which affected her ability to continue working the next day. She was afraid, but hawking is only the profession and source of income available to poor Hindu women in that sub-community. Officials use their power against poor and marginalised people. While this can happen to any poor people, including poor Muslim women, the probability that it will happen to poor Hindu women is greater as they are more likely to be restricted to working as a hawker than poor Muslim women.

Participant (woman aged 36–60), the mother of the abducted girl Vidya expressed:

Since May 2019, my family had registered FIR at police station but yet my daughter has not been recovered. My community elders and family members have stepped up efforts for my daughter’s recovery, approaching District and Sindh Minorities Affairs Minister. Even many protests were held to break the government silence, yet no result appeared. While Sindh CM took notice and directed the police to take immediate action to recover my daughter Vidya, the police came and harassed my family members. They have not made any satisfactory progress in a whole year. My family is going through a mental trauma and feel unsafe.

Participants were asked about responses to violence perpetrated against Hindu women, this time from the media.

BB. Do the media typically respond to violence perpetrated against women from this religiously marginalised group?

Table BB				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	06	02	02	00
Group-W-1 (18–35)	05	03	04	00

Group-W-2 (36–60)	04	07	00	01
Group-H-M (18–60)	07	05	00	00

Source: Author's own.

Just under of 50 per cent of participants felt the media responds to violence against Hindu women, compared to 40 per cent who felt it does not. The question does not specify the forms of media, but English print media has a high rate of reporting news on religious minorities compared to the Urdu print media, in which religious minority issues are not covered. The English print media reports forced conversions and forced marriages of Hindu women and girls to Islam, particularly in Sindh.

The media is a central pillar that can support the promotion of minority rights, as well as be responsible enough to maintain harmony among different religious groups. While the media judiciously reports conversions of non-Muslims to Islam, often portrayed as positive stories, it remains silent on the 'organised conversions' that take place, particularly in Sindh. These 'organised conversions' are where a number of madrassas (college for Islamic instruction) have forcibly converted abducted Hindu girls and women in a coordinated manner.

Stereotypes of Hindu people also exist in the media. They portray negative images of the Hindu community where Hindus are projected as agents of India, and Hindu characters in TV programmes and films are depicted as 'opportunist', 'users', and 'unpatriotic' to Pakistan.

Participant (man aged 18–60) expressed:

The mainstream media does not support and cover Hindus' issues, but it plays a role against minority people, as it is owned by majority group persons. Social media also plays a huge role, more so than print media and TV channels. Most of the incidents related to religious minorities, Hindu women, and other minorities appeared on social media. For example, the provincial media are the only ones to cover instances of forced conversions of Hindu girls, whereas the mainstream media tends to ignore these stories, or present them as a positive, consensual conversion to Islam.

2.2.21 Threats to Hindus' property and assets

Land grabbing and forcing Hindu communities off their property is also a significant threat facing Hindus. When the country of Pakistan was created, many Hindus left their homes and properties and departed to India, leaving behind temples, places of worship, and land that is religiously significant. The Evacuee Trust Property Board (ETPB) was established after autonomy of Pakistan to manage the property, notably the places of worship, that were left by Hindu communities. Even though the ETPB is entrusted with the responsibilities of maintenance and protection of such properties, having no right to sell them, it has been noticed that many of these Hindu properties are now either occupied or have been sold to those who are not Hindu. In Sindh province, most of the burial places that belonged to the Scheduled Castes have been taken over by Muslims. Hindus belonging to lower castes are now not allowed to bury their dead there.

The powerful people easily target Hindu properties: they grab them and change the land's documents by using their influence. Many properties and graveyard lands have been grabbed, and recently many encroachment cases have been reported. Hindu citizens are bothered about not being able to carry out their practices and traditions as per their religion. For example, Veengas (2019) reported that in October 2013 the dead body of a Hindu individual called Bhoro Bheel was dug out of his grave and then dragged through the streets by majority religious parties in Pangrio, Sindh. Another case was in Matiari District in Hala City, Sindh, where a girl's parents were looking for land to bury her dead body because people from the majority were not allowing them to bury her in their traditional graveyard.

In September 2019, three temples, a school, and houses of the Hindu community in Ghotki, Sindh were attacked by an aggressive mob after the principal of the local public school had been accused of blasphemy by a student (*Pakistan Today* 2019). The blasphemy laws consist of a group of laws, the centerpiece of which is section 295 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), which provides penalties for blasphemy and other 'offences against religion'. These range from a fine to the death sentence. The majority of blasphemy cases are based on false allegations stemming from property issues or other personal or family quarrels. Due to anger or a desire for revenge, a member of the majority religion makes an unauthentic claim of blasphemy which then leads to mob violence against the victim.

These laws have been repeatedly condemned by national and international observers as severely contradicting freedom of expression, of religion, and of opinion, and recognised as likely to be used as tools of religious persecution against minorities. In 2009, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted that Pakistan's 'blasphemy

laws may be used in a discriminatory manner against religious minority groups' (Human Rights Council 2012: 11).

Other examples include a Hindu temple in Kunbh town, Khairpur, Sindh being attacked by Islamic extremists in February 2019, also setting fire to 'Holy Books' and the idols of gods inside. Additionally, the old residents of Hindu families and community members living in Karachi had some assets belonging to their forefathers (and some of which they had earned) that were forcefully purchased from them. They were paid a very minor amount, as state dealers wanted to build there. Even community members who have small assets or only a little agricultural land in rural areas feel insecure and fear land grabbing by influential people.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) said:

My family and a few other families in our Hindu community live in a compound where around 25 to 30 families have been dwelling for decades. One of the families sold their house to a Muslim family who were professional butchers. Later on, this family had started harassing Hindu people of the compound on an extreme level. Due to this stress a few other Hindu families also sold their houses at very low prices to be able to move away from the stress. The butcher families still bother us and keep irritating us through verbal and physical mistreatment. They deliberately bother Hindus of our compound because they intend to buy the rest of the houses from Hindus at a very low price. We do not want to leave or sell our homes because this is Hindu property and belongs to our ancestors.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) shared:

An old inactive temple, which had been locked for decades, near to my home, was suddenly demolished, and now residential construction is under process there. That temple belonged to Hindus, and Muslims are not supposed to claim it. Instead they grabbed it, but the Hindu community living in the surrounding area didn't make any objection due to fear.

2.2.22 Role of Hindu institutions in their women's lives

Finally, participants were asked about Hindu institutions, and to what extent they play a positive role in their lives (or the lives of Hindu women, in the case of the men that were asked).

CC. Do the religious Hindu institutions play a positive role in the lives of poor Hindu women?

Table CC				
Groups	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Group-H-G (14–17)	00	00	08	02
Group-W-1 (18–35)	02	06	04	00
Group-W-2 (36–60)	04	08	00	00
Group-H-M (18–60)	05	07	00	00

Source: Author's own.

Table CC shows quite a mixed response across the different FGDs to this question. The majority of girls did not know whether Hindu institutions play a positive role or not, whereas the majority of the women aged 18–60 felt they do not (58 per cent). The men were split in their answers, with just over 50 per cent agreeing with the women that Hindu institutions do not play a positive role in Hindu women's lives. This suggests that poor Hindu women not only have to contend with discrimination and exclusion from those outside of their religion, but also have to contend with their own institutions not being as supportive as they perhaps should be.

Hindu women from marginalised groups experience misery due to cultural and traditional trends in their communities. Hindu women are defenceless compared to women from the majority religion: Muslim women can claim their given religious rights, like divorce (*khulā*), and property rights. Hindu women cannot claim any of these, and are often ignorant of their legal, social, and human rights as they remain within the narrow confines of their home. They become victims of domestic violence, experience extreme mental and emotional torture, and sexual crimes which they cannot defend themselves against. The heads of their community are men and they do not take much interest in issues related to women. Community elders expect women to cope and adjust to everything.

Participant (woman aged 18–35) shared:

We women face some harsh and negligent behaviour of men. I am earning to support my family as well as looking after children, doing the household work and other family responsibilities. But nobody cares about me. If anything happens to me my husband gets angry at me. If I get home late due to traffic or any other reason, he starts to fight and beats me. When I make a complaint to the elders, they tell me to just ignore his harsh behaviour and just do whatever he says. They said this would help me to maintain my relationship and family. Nobody asks my husband to not behave like he does.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) shared:

Community and family elders always push women to bear everything and not make complaints against any family member if in-laws or my husband abuse me or misbehave. This is our tradition and it's expected that women have to bear whatever their in-laws and husband instruct them to do. Females should be obedient to them. Even during my pregnancy I was feeling not well and it was tough to do all the home chores. When I asked my husband to let me rest at my parents' home for a few days, he and my in-laws got angry and asked me, 'Who would look after the home? If you want rest you better leave our home forever.' I got more depressed and complained to my family and community's elders. They all told me to keep patient for the sake of good relations and kids.

Participant (man aged 18–60) shared:

It is right that a community's matters and decisions are made only by community's eldest ones and they have always been male persons. Women have never been decision makers. I personally believe that only woman can understand woman problems, but our community thinks that women should only deal with the family work. This is the reason that women are always asked to keep patient and tolerant, no matter what is happening with her or to her by her family members, as they are usually either torturing her mentally, emotionally or physically. I am against this behaviour. I think females should be part of decision making and have some rights to make her life's decision making.

Participant (man aged 18–60) shared:

Following the community's elders is our tradition, and it's the responsibility of all of us. It is called respect. We believe that elders are experienced and they can choose better options for our community's females, and males as well. In

our society males always deal with things angrily and are harsh. That has become part of our culture and females are expected to be cool, obedient, and adjust to everything. That's why females are asked to be tolerant and asked to ignore males' behaviours. Doing so helps to maintain family relations. If elders do not instruct women in this way then all couples will get separations. I think it is good to follow elders of our community and respect their decisions.

When marginalised females are appreciated for any good reasons, like success in exams or in a school programme, that makes them happy and they feel they are given honour and respect. They feel happy and proud.

Participant (woman aged 18–35) shared:

Due to our encroachment issue, we working women were forced to stop work in Impress Market, Saddar, where we had been working for many years. Now police and government asked us not to work from there, due to this I raised my voice with the support of civil society on behalf of all working women who work from the same location. My voice went vocal and we were allowed to work there again. Due to this success these women, and my community as well, including my male family members, appreciated me for my boldness. That really made me very happy and I was feeling very proud and strong.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

I am better at studying than my brothers. I always make rank and participate in school debates and in programmes held at the temple, where I usually get first and second position. My parents, and especially my Papa, appreciate me and ask my brothers to learn from me. Whenever I hear those words from my Papa I feel so proud. It doubles my confidence and then community people also admire me in front of my family. My father feels more proud. I really cannot express my feelings of happiness.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) shared:

Yes, we women feel very happy and energetic whenever we are encouraged and supported by our families. When I started to support my daughter to study in college she completed her intermediate and started tuition from home, people loved to send their children to my daughter for good home tuition. People also started to admire my daughter's hard work and the male members of my family now encourage my daughter. These encouraging words make me

very proud and comfortable that I took this step for my daughter, and now my husband also supports me for my daughter's education.

2.2.23 Public perceptions of Hindu women and girls

Participants shared various experiences of public perceptions about Hindu women and girls in their communities:

- Those from the majority religion make fun by hooting and using words for Hindus about their castes, such as 'Meghwar' and 'Bagris', and sometimes they hoot 'Hindu' and aggressively call '*Kafar*' (an offensive term for non-Muslims) which makes them feel sad and panicky.
- Often men from the majority religion harass Hindu women by hooting at them about the way they dress, saying things like, '*Choli k Pichy Kiya hai*' (what's inside your blouse?), '*Oh Gagraywalli*' (Ms Skirt), and use other slang words.
- Participants expressed that the media does not cover much about Hindu women, as Hindu communities limit their women. They were also unaware about elite Hindu women's representation. Young women said that during the Diwali and Holi festivals, the media cover their celebrations but only use photos of Hindu women in order to make offensive comments in their news stories.
- When women go out in public wearing the traditional dress that makes them identifiable as Hindus, a few people show interest in a non-offensive way by asking questions about Hindu culture.
- Girls narrated that the first time they were introduced to people from the majority religion they experienced some strange gestures that showed shock and surprise. Some are happy to meet Hindus, but many look at the Hindu girls as if they are aliens and keep staring at them. Many of those from the majority religion like to keep their distance, especially Muslim women, and do not like to eat with the Hindu women. However, there are a few in the majority to whom religious identity does not matter.
- Religious minorities are often portrayed as inferior or second-class citizens in public textbooks because of beliefs about Partition being based on religion. These textbooks promote hatred against Hindus, meaning that children from the very beginning are exposed to hateful literature where Hindus are repeatedly described as extremists and eternal enemies of Islam. Textbooks claim that Hindu culture and society is based on injustice and cruelty, while Islam delivers a message of peace and brotherhood.
- Participants said that the school subjects related to religious history or to Pakistan's history outline that Hindus violated Muslims during Partition. Social

studies textbooks teach that India attacked Muslims in 1948 and 1965 (in class five). They claim that Bengali separatism was a result of Hindu teachers and traders; and after the 1965 war, India conspired with the Hindus of Bengal and succeeded in spreading hate among the Bengalis about West Pakistan, finally attacking East Pakistan in December 1971, thus causing the breakup of East and West Pakistan. In fact, some textbooks say that Pakistan had almost won the 1971 war. Hindus are represented as enemies and mocked for worshipping many gods and goddess made of stone. Such teaching is still present and leads to Hindu students being mocked by Muslim classmates and teachers. Muslim classmates make fun of Hindus when the teacher leaves the room and try to make them feel ashamed. Consequently, these schoolchildren feel embarrassed and hurt and avoid eye contact with their fellow classmates.

Participant (girl aged 14–17) shared:

I was feeling very bad when my teacher was briefing the chapter of Social Studies which teaches how Hindus behaved with Muslims at the time of the partition of India and Pakistan. When my teacher left the room two class fellows asked questions to me, 'Why were you Hindus like that in the past? Do you still misbehave with Muslims? Why do you Hindus not go back to India?'

Participant (man aged 18–60) said:

In our school time, fellow boys used to make fun of me in break time, calling me 'Hindu, Hindu', and when I tried to counter they usually abused me with names such as, 'Hindu ka Bacha, Kafar Ki Olad'[child of non-Muslim). Sometimes I used to make questions to my mother, 'Why we are not Muslims? Why we are Hindus?' Those words really hurt me when I used to hear them in my schooldays.

Participant (woman aged 36–60) shared:

In 7th standard during Islamiyat [Islamic] period, the oral exam was going on. In my class there were students reciting Islamiyat Ayaat [holy verses] with Urdu translation. I also tried and pronounced the verse wrong. My teacher got angry and asked me, 'Why did you try to recite Holy Verses, you are Hindu and Kafar [non-Muslim]. You cannot recite.' As she left the class a few of my classmates started laughing at me and teasing me by calling 'Kafar Oye Kafar'[bullied].

3 Conclusion

- Scheduled Caste marginalised Hindu women face cultural, social, and security obstacles, plus their religious identity makes their lives even harder and more challenging. They face multiple and intersectional discrimination, sexual harassment, violence, and threats of forced conversions and forced marriages. They find themselves in a particularly dire situation because of the customs and culture of both their community and wider society, and this affects their lives, creating gaps between men and women in mobility, education, health, economics, and politics. They become discouraged and unable to contribute to life socially or economically. They are bound by their communities to follow cultural and traditional practices, including wearing typical feminine Hindu clothing that carries symbols of both their marital status and their religious identity. This is not something men from the same communities or women from the majority religion face.
- Violence against women and girls is shrouded in silence. Hindu women are affected by gender-based violence within both their communities and wider society. This includes assorted forms of interpersonal violence committed against them by their community and the norms the community upholds, by classmates, intimate partners, neighbours, and strangers. Fear of further marginalisation within their communities stops women from speaking out against the violence they experience and therefore prevents them from being able to access justice.
- Hindu women experience more difficulties in the workplace compared to men of the same class as they are frequently targeted with gender-based harassment while being discriminated against in various ways related to their religious identity. For example, they are refused leave for holiday, even on religious occasions, and are paid low wages and smaller salaries, as well as being denied other facilities.
- The prevalence of extremist religious elements has adversely affected Hindu women's empowerment and mobility. The dominance of sociocultural traditions badly affect the freedom of marginalised women living in both urban and rural areas, as they are mostly restricted to the domestic boundaries of their homes and deprived access to education. This is especially the case with Scheduled Caste Hindu women who are illiterate compared to the males of their community and women of the elite Hindu class. Where Hindu women are able to access educational institutions, they experience discrimination because of their religious identity and are often asked to convert to Islam. This is experienced by both males and females.

- Hindu and other minority women are not given ample representation in local and national authorities. Even where there are quotas for minorities, only the men are selected. Hindu women are not educated or sensitised for political participation and social change, or for knowing their rights.
- It is clear that laws and regulations alone will not prevent violence against religious minority women in Pakistan. Instead, a much deeper process is needed to transform the entire mindset of society, both toward reversing the acceptance of violence against women and toward respect for different creeds and beliefs. The implementation of laws and regulations also needs to be strictly monitored. Education systems and awareness-raising ought to be used as tools to bring improvements in the lives of marginalised women.
- There were many areas throughout this study where the answers given by men in their FGDs were different to the answers given by women and girls in their FGDs. This suggests that generally men are not aware of the extent of the issues facing the poor women in their community.

4 Recommendations

1. Forced conversion of minority Hindu girls and women to Islam in Pakistan should be a concern for everybody who believes in equality, justice, religious freedom, and human rights. There is an urgent need to restore minorities' faith in the government and the courts.
2. Strict action should be taken against the various religious elements that are known to support atrocities against Hindu women and girls, such as the unlawful actors of madrassas (colleges for Islamic instruction).
3. There must be effective complaints mechanisms in place to allow Hindu students in educational institutions who experience discrimination on the basis of their religion to report this discrimination and for action to be taken.
4. All textbooks and curriculum resources from primary school to college must be modified to ensure the removal of hate speech and discriminatory attitudes towards Hindus, especially where this is related to the history of the Partition of India.
5. Religious minority women should be integrated into mainstream society, both socially and politically. There must be reserved seats for minority women in local, provincial, and national assemblies in order to encourage their political participation and to

ensure representation in decision making. They must be included in programmes for their socioeconomic empowerment at governmental and non-governmental levels.

6. The government should show more concern for the protection of minority rights, understanding that the current constitutional guarantees, religious injunctions, and international covenants signed by Pakistan are not being effectively implemented for the benefit of religious minorities in the country.
7. The Government of Pakistan must ensure the full protection of women from religious minorities, and particularly vulnerable Hindu teenage girls, under the children's rights and freedom of religion acts, as entrenched in international conventions. Specifically, Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 30 on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, for both of which Pakistan is a signatory.
8. Ensure that all national laws and policies comply with Pakistan's obligations under international human rights law, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (ratified in 1996) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ratified in 2008).
9. The Criminal Law (Protection of Minorities) Bill must be passed and ratified in order to overcome the forcible religious conversions and forced marriages of persons under the age of 18.
10. Data must be recorded on acts of violence against minorities, and Hindu women in Sindh specifically, including forced conversion, abductions, and harassment in both rural and urban areas. There is a need to conduct a gender-based census in the country at both national and provincial levels in order to collect relevant and accurate data.
11. Job quotas for minorities must be implemented correctly, with jobs other than sanitary work and sweeping made accessible to minority women.
12. Independent commissions for religious and gender equality, or similar institutions, should be set up to receive and investigate complaints related to minority women. They should also offer advice to victims of discrimination and undertake awareness-raising activities to promote the principles of non-discrimination and promote understanding between different communities.

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Annexe 1: Case Studies

Woman abducted and raped up to three months: (by Group-H-M)

A Hindu lady, aged 35 years, resided with her husband in slum house in Behran Mori, Garibabad, district Hyderabad Sindh, she had five children, four daughters and one son. She had been working in a recycling plastic factory at Hyderabad as daily wages for sorting recyclable plastic. On 17 March 2019, three persons kidnapped her forcefully from her house in the presence of her family members on gun point, three men sudden entered in her house, holding guns, she was dragged, when her family members yelled and tried to stop, they were pointed pistol upon and were instructed for remaining calm, due to dread and fear of pistols family members went helpless and remained calm, accused pulled out into a car of white colour with the intention of zina [rape].

Culprits raped her continues three months and converted her religion into Islam, forcefully and managed a false paper of free will marriage, she was kept at Matli city in District Thatta near railway station, one she saw some community women nearby her, she cried loudly for help, women helped, they all reached at Matli thana [police station], where she got recorded her statement, some journalists also approached on the spot, her family members also arrived there. Even FIR was lodged on 20 March 2019 in Hyderabad, locality but no justice and proceeding held.

Vidya went missing for a year: (by Group-W-2)

Vidya Rajesh: A missing girl, daughter of Ami and Rajesh, living in Maripur, Karachi. Ami has been running from here to there for almost one year for the recovery of her daughter Vidya Rajesh.

16 years old Vidya studied in grade seven. One day, she went to school and never came back to her home: she went missing. Since then her parents had searched every nook and corner of the city, but she is nowhere in the sight. No one could be able to tell about her whereabouts, even the police.

Vidya's mother, Ami started telling the incident but could not continue because of crying. Later on, she spoke that people blamed her for not taking

care of daughter properly, she had been claimed for the disappearance of her own daughter. She said whenever a girl is kidnapped or goes missing, her family women especially sisters and mother are blamed for incidents and honour of the families by community and society. She further said her daughter was studying in seventh grade, who did not even know about the streets of the colony where they live. Police also stated annoying about her whereabouts. Vidya was allegedly kidnapped or went missing on 20 May 2019. A year has passed but police had failed to recover her. Police sometimes become active when there a huge pressure from community members and activists is developed but after a few raids, they again become inactive. Even they made all efforts from police to other government institutes for the recovery of Vidya, people assure them for revival but no outcome yet there. According to Ami, girls and women of her family face more restrictions after Vidya's disappearance, because family's men have become more conscious and worried about their safety.

The girl deceived and converted against her will: (by Group-H-G)

There was a kidnapping case, reported in Lyari Karachi, two years ago: a 15 years old girl named Poonam was invited to an adjunct home of her friend's family for applying henna [tattoo] on the bride's hands she was requested, as she was expert of henna designing. She went to them and could not return, for several hours, her family visited the family where she went, those people refused to accept that she had come to their home.

Finally, few neighbourhoods told them that a girl was brought there, she was intoxicated, head and face was covered with a veil and when girl's parents re-inquired with the help of community and neighbours' influential persons the accused family informed her parents that she had been converted to Islam and was given a new name 'Saira'. When they saw her, she was in stupor. Parents asked her questions, whether she was converted to Islam on her own will? Or she wanted to go with her parents? She just gave a positive and a negative nod respectively. She was unable to respond because of the intoxication.

Parents told that police was reluctant to support them, saying that the girl had been converted and they had documents with her thumb impression to prove her willingness. But Poonam's family objected, saying that she was an

educated girl and why had she been taken thumb impressions instead of signature? She had to sign, if she had been converted on her free will.

Police asked them to take her statement in thana [police station] and to wait for two days until she would be under custody of them and will be appeared in the court. The girl was threatened by the kidnappers, saying that they will also kidnap her other sisters and kill her brother, due to she was extremely afraid and worried, she agreed to give her statement in the accuser's favour, but parents and community people assured her that nothing is going to happen with her.

Her parents registered case and decided to handle legally in court rather than only arguing in police station, when she was appeared in court, her parents asked her just do what she liked instead of fear, she recorded her statement that she was deceived on the name of henna applying to a bride, then was threaten there. She never embraced Islam and she wanted to go with her parents. She cried and asked for mercy to her and her parents, finally case was proceed with girl's statement, her offenders were taken under investigation and she was backed with her parents.

Annexe 2: Participants of the Focus Group Discussions

<i>FGD #</i>	<i>Place of FGD</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>FGD</i>	<i>Gender/ Age</i>	<i>Participant s (No.)</i>	<i>Area of participants' work</i>
<i>1st</i>	<i>Human Rights Commission of Pakistan Office Saddar, Karachi</i>	<i>Friday, 6 March 2020</i>	<i>FGD-01 (Group-W-1)</i>	<i>Women (18 to 35)</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>Hindu women labourers, factory workers, dried fruit sellers, bangle-seller, housemaids, sanitary workers, and housewives</i>
<i>2nd</i>	<i>Human Rights Commission of Pakistan Office Saddar, Karachi</i>	<i>Friday, 13 March 2020</i>	<i>FGD-02 (Group-W-2)</i>	<i>Women (36-60)</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>Hindu women ex-nurses, ex-teacher, labourers, factory workers, dried fruit sellers, home-based workers/labourers, housemaids, tailor, sanitary workers, and housewives</i>
<i>3rd</i>	<i>Minority Welfare Movement Liyari, Karachi</i>	<i>Friday, 20 March 2020</i>	<i>FGD-03 (Group-H-G)</i>	<i>Girls (14-17)</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>Students of schools and colleges, beautician, tutor</i>

4th	<i>Professionals and Trainers Training Hall, Karachi</i>	<i>Friday, 5 June 2020</i>	<i>FGD-04 (Group-H-1)</i>	<i>Men (18-60)</i>	12	<i>Social workers, human rights activists, women and youth rights worker, political activist, lawyer, teacher, sanitary worker, students, journalist, and labourer</i>
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Annexe 3: Template Informed Participants Consent Form

Willingness to participate in research

Your participation in today's activity is completely voluntary. If you do not want to be included, please do not join. Because the information and the experiences you provide will be included in our research.

In today's activity, the information you provide will be protected; if you permit, your identity will be displayed otherwise, this research will be used to document anonymous or other temporary names.

This activity will be recorded audio. The purpose of recording is that the researcher does not miss any important details; the audio recording will be deleted after completion of the research study.

1. I am fully aware of the purposes of today's research study. I understand that even if I am willing to participate right now, I can refrain from responding to discussions at any time, where I am not satisfied.
2. I understand that I will not have any benefit directly from participating in this research.
3. I agree to my discussion being audio-recorded only for a time period.
4. I understand that any information I provide for this study will be kept confidential and will not be disclosed without my permission, its only for research work.
5. In this research study my name is allowed to reveal my identity.

Yes_____ No_____

Participant Name: _____ Date: _____ Sign: _____

Researcher Name: _____ Date: _____ Sign: _____



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