



DigitalRightsFoundation  
"KNOW YOUR RIGHTS"

# RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN ONLINE SPACES

RESEARCH ON THEIR  
EXPERIENCES IN PAKISTAN





## ABOUT

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Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is a feminist, not-for-profit organisation based in Pakistan working on digital freedoms since 2013. DRF envisions a place where all people, especially women and gender minorities, can exercise their right of expression without being threatened. DRF believes that a free internet with access to information and impeccable privacy policies can create safe online spaces for not only women but the world at large

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Executive Summary	1
a. Main objectives	
b. Key findings	
c. Definition	
2. Introductions	4
3. Methodology	5
4. Context	6
a. Social, Political, and Economic	
b. Legal	
c. International Obligations	
5. Literature Review	12
a. Technology's evil twin	
b. Pakistan and the persecution of minorities	
c. Women and religious persecution	
d. COVID-19 and the scapegoating of minorities	
6. Findings	16
a. Participant demographics	
b. Internet usage among participants	
c. Self-expression online	
d. Experiences of online negativity	
e. Online privacy	
f. Women	
g. Awareness of legal frameworks	
7. Recommendations	22
a. From the religious minorities' communities	
b. For civil society	
c. For the state	
d. For social media platforms	
8. Conclusion	27
9. References	28



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research by the Digital Rights Foundation was motivated by the increasing difficulties faced by religious minorities residing in Pakistan, that are now just as much a part of our daily lives as our digital ones. Online spaces are emerging as sites of expression and platforms where citizens are increasingly getting their primary information and news. As such, the restrictive realities of offline spaces over the past decade have driven citizens to move to online spaces to regain their right to free expression. However, with repressive regulation, intensified surveillance and increased instances of cyber violence, digital spaces are not only coming under attack but have also themselves become very hostile. The greater brunt of this hostility is faced by vulnerable segments of the population including women as well as gender, ethnic, and religious minorities.

Online harassment, hate speech and disinformation are also translating into offline physical spaces adding to political polarisation, growing intolerance and, in some cases, direct violence. In January 2017, four bloggers with progressive and liberal views went ‘missing,’ reported to be victims of enforced disappearances.<sup>1</sup> Criticism of the government online has led to notices/warnings being issued to activists and journalists. Women speaking up online about their harassment and abuse have had First Information Reports (FIRs) issued against them.<sup>2</sup> Disinformation and rumours online led to the killing of university student Mashal Khan.<sup>3</sup> Such incidents highlight zero tolerance for dissent, which can lead to legal consequences, and even death at the hands of a mob. The cumulative impact of this is threatened expression and fear of real-world violence forcing vulnerable groups to leave the internet and/or endure psychological trauma, which exacerbates their exclusion from the civil processes. Religious minorities are among the most vulnerable targets experiencing an escalation in covert cyber-attacks (malware, phishing and spyware). Digital attacks can impact an individual and their family, and play a role in their decision to continue to work or leave due to burn-out, fear of persecution or loss of financial means. Unsafe digital practices also put their data and privacy at risk.

In light of these growing concerns, the aim of this study was to conduct a comprehensive participatory research on the experience of gender and religious minorities online, in the way that they experience the internet, their visibility and how it differs from the majority faith users in the country, the privacy implications of their existence and more so, their activism.

The stakeholders in this research are members of religious minority communities, women and vulnerable communities. Faith-based minorities constitute less than 5% of Pakistan’s 207 million population, according to the 2017 national census. The estimated 10 million followers of religious minority groups face legal, institutional and policy discrimination that keeps them marginalised.



## Main objectives

- Map and understand the digital challenges and experiences of religious minorities and gender and provide an analytical examination of the impact of these risks on their right to privacy and other fundamental rights
- Contribute to the academic literature on the digital experiences of religious minorities in Pakistan which is understudied
- Use the research as a baseline study to design advocacy campaigns, policy briefs, and consultations with policymakers to make the legislation governing online spaces pro-gender and pro-minority rights
- Use the research to design customized training to enhance the skill-set of the vulnerable communities to use online spaces effectively to express their right to free expression and also educate them on data privacy and protection

# Key findings

We mapped the experiences of members of religious minorities by first disseminating an online survey questionnaire and through it, recruiting volunteers who would be comfortable speaking to us about their experiences. Out of 113 respondents to the survey, 40 agreed to be contacted for follow-up interviews out of which 20 participants were reached out to, and their responses collected through structured interviews for our findings. We recorded their answers on the following themes: participant demographics, internet usage among participants, self-expression online, experiences with online negativity, online privacy, harassment of women, and awareness of legal frameworks.

The findings of this report show that religious minorities in Pakistan exist under precarious and vulnerable conditions in online spaces. In our survey responses, a majority of respondents mentioned having experienced online negativity, including backlash or threats on the basis of religious affiliation and/or a combination of factors. Forms of online negativity ranged from receiving negative comments and derogatory language to daily abuse and threats to their life. A majority also mentioned being subject to abusive language and death threats for posting their opinions online. Out of those that chose to reveal their religious affiliation online, most had experienced online abuse as a result. Though they considered online privacy to be of utmost importance, many felt insecure and unsure about their own privacy in online spaces and the institutional measures to protect them from online breaches.

Our follow up interviews revealed that participants were concerned about the lack of privacy and security measures taken by social media platforms, including the failure to contextualise content regulation to cultural and linguistic settings. They also elaborated on having to limit themselves online due to their religious affiliation, ranging from altering their privacy settings to deleting their social media profiles altogether. The results from this study show that religious minorities are vulnerable in the online sphere and have not been equipped with the appropriate security measures to ensure their safety and privacy online.

## Definition

This study defines religious minorities as those communities who belong to a religion other than Islam. Within Islam, it refers to those sectarian communities whose members are in a minority in Pakistan. This study recognises Sunni Muslims as the majority religious community in Pakistan.

# INTRODUCTION

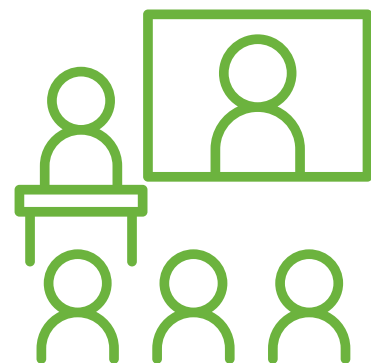
According to the Pew Research Centre's Social Hostilities Index, Pakistan continues to be ranked amongst the high to very high countries in their mistreatment of religious minorities.<sup>4</sup> Minority Rights International, an international organization working for the rights and protection of religious and ethnic minorities globally, states that in Pakistan, "the environment in which minorities find themselves is characterized by hate speech, frequent invocation of blasphemy laws and increasingly violent attacks on places of worship".<sup>5</sup> This culture of discrimination permeates beyond the social, political and legal spheres into the ever-expanding and inadequately regulated digital sphere.

While significant research has been conducted on the condition of religious minorities in Pakistan, there are fewer studies attempting to map the experiences of religious minorities online. Indeed, the digital space has become a vital extension of the public sphere in Pakistan, and consequently, the attitudes and patterns of behaviour seen online are deeply reflective of the nature of the society in which they occur. Indeed, there are cases where online violence has been deeply interlinked with offline violence. For example, earlier this year, Tahir Ahmed Naseem, member of a religious minority, was fatally shot at his own trial in Peshawar by a teenager, when a video of him declaring himself to be a prophet was circulated on social media.<sup>6</sup>

Keeping this inextricable link between online and offline spaces in mind, this study aims to investigate the experiences of religious minorities as they operate in digital spaces in Pakistan. This study brings together the vast literature on minority persecution with the

increased salience and growth of online platforms in Pakistan. The question it essentially asks is: how do religious minorities experience online spaces in Pakistan? The aim of this study is two pronged: Firstly, to highlight the experience of censorship, surveillance, violence and harassment faced by religious minorities in the online space and secondly, to provide policy recommendations on how to tackle this form of persecution.

In the current context, religious minorities have come to be understood as threats to the unitary body of the Muslim homeland that Pakistan is imagined as. As the online sphere expands, exclusionary tactics and sentiments are extended from the offline world into the digital arena, and then back into the real world when they are actualised into violent acts. In this context, it becomes crucial to explore the intricacies of religious minority experiences online, in an effort to understand the precarious nature of their existence as it extends into and out of the online domain. That is precisely the aim of this study.



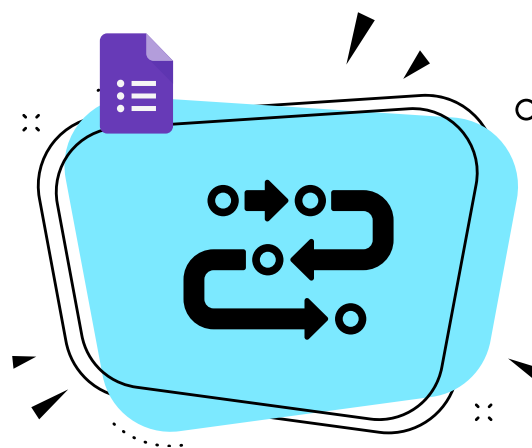


# METHODOLOGY

This report has been written on the basis of both quantitative and qualitative data, collected through a written survey and interviews respectively. The primary source was an online questionnaire, hosted on Google Forms, proliferated across various online platforms. This questionnaire provided the basis for examining the experiences of religious minorities in online spaces and allowed us to map themes to explore in follow-up interviews. Of the 113 respondents of the questionnaire, 41 agreed to an interview over Zoom. We conducted 20 semi-structured online interviews around issues such as self-censorship and direct forms of violence as a result of hateful rhetoric online. This data was essential to understand the individual experiences of specific religious minorities, including the oft-ignored struggles they face in their everyday lives. Finally, data from the questionnaire and interviews was compiled and analysed. The insights from these findings are provided in this report and supported by a literature review.

It must be noted that this study does not claim to capture the experiences of all religious minorities across Pakistan. It does not assert that respondents are representative of the entire demographic of religious minorities living in Pakistan. Indeed, there are minority groups that are not represented within this study purely due to the nature of the methodology. Therefore, to make generalizable inferences based on the data set would be an error. Furthermore, due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, data-gathering was hindered due to various issues such as limited availability of participants and internet connectivity problems.

With a greater data set and increased respondents, the findings may be substantiated and strengthened further.



# CONTEXT

## a. Social, political and economic

Minority exclusion is not a new phenomenon in Pakistan. Because many have historically deemed Pakistan to be an independent territory created specifically for a Muslim majority, minorities have always elicited exclusionary sentiments and been perceived as threats to the Sunni Muslim body of the nation. As Fuchs and Fuchs note, “the presence of these ‘other’ communities calls into question established ideas of citizenship and belonging and evokes anxieties about the stability of a centralised and flattened ‘Pakistani’ national identity”.<sup>7</sup> For the approximately 11-13 million minorities residing in Pakistan, exclusion and persecution are part of daily life.<sup>8</sup> Issues faced by minorities can include multiple intersecting forms of violence, including lack of access to education and healthcare, discrimination in the workplace. Extreme forms of direct violence include abductions, forced conversions, target killings and accusations of blasphemy.<sup>9</sup>

A large reason for such extreme forms of violence against religious minorities is the increasing level of misinformation, circulating more widely now than before as a result of online spheres. Hindus and Christians are regularly targeted under the blasphemy laws. A notable case was the 2009 Gojra incident, where seven Christians were burnt alive on an allegation of blasphemy.<sup>10</sup> The high-profile case of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman accused and sentenced to death in 2010 (a decision that was overturned by the Supreme Court in 2018), also demonstrated the volatile socio-legal condition in which Christians find

themselves.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, Hindus are regularly subjected to forced conversions, primarily in the Sindh region. Though there is no reliable statistic due to underreporting and institutional failures, human rights organizations suggest that approximately 300 cases of forced conversions occur annually, with around 1200-5000 Hindus leaving Pakistan annually due to such violence.<sup>12</sup>

Institutionally, the precarious status of minority citizenship in Pakistan renders access to basic services and aid extremely difficult. In spite of the 5 percent minority job quota, minorities are regularly left out of political participation, education, employment; and positions remain largely unfilled. When employed, they are kept out of senior positions. For example, in government statistics from 2010-11, only 2.6 percent of federal jobs were held by people belonging to religious minority groups approximately 70 per cent were in the two lowest grades.<sup>13</sup> A study by the Christian Study Centre (CSC) showed the Christians and other minority groups were regularly kept out of higher positions in the civil and armed forces.<sup>14</sup> Christians are routinely hired to perform the most menial and low-paid jobs, such as garbage collection and sewage cleaning, exacerbating the already deep divide between the majority and minority religious groups and reinforcing the insecurity religious minorities continue to feel through economic marginalisation. When they manage to rise above the barriers, social pressures and campaigns continue to restrict them. For example, in 2018, Princeton University economist Atif Mian was asked to step down from the Economic Advisory Council shortly after his appointment, after groups such as the Tehrik-e-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) objected to his Ahmadi faith.<sup>15</sup>

In academic institutions, students from minority religious backgrounds are continuously discriminated against. Gill found that secondary-level textbooks contained derogatory and demeaning remarks against religious minorities, particularly Christians and Hindus. Moreover, students of religious minorities are often forced to eat at separate tables in public schools.<sup>16</sup> Such tensions were exacerbated further by the adoption of the Punjab Curriculum and Textbook Act 2015 and the Punjab Compulsory Teaching of the Holy Quran Act in 2018. As of 2020, the adoption of the Single National Curriculum risks inserting further mainstream Muslim majority rhetoric into academic institutions, forcing children from religious minorities to read the Quran and memorise verses with translations.<sup>17</sup> Despite the recently mandated 2 percent quota reserved for minorities, students continue to face barriers to their involvement in education. In 2008, Punjab Medical College issued the rustication letters for 15 female and 8 male Ahmadi students after a campaign was started by the Islami Jamiat Talabah (a student wing of the Jamaat Islami) for their expulsion.<sup>18</sup> In 2016, Mashal Khan, a student at Abdul Wali Khan University Mardan was publicly lynched by an angry mob over allegations of posting blasphemous content online.<sup>19</sup> In the same year, Sharoon Masih, a 17-year-old studying at MC Model Boys Government School, was beaten to death by his classmates for allegedly drinking from the same glass as a Muslim.<sup>20</sup>

The repeated victimization of religious minorities in academic institutions is representative of their broader persecution and endangerment in all spheres of public life in Pakistan. This continues to be reinforced during the current COVID 19 crisis.

In 2020, when Hazara pilgrims returning home to Pakistan from Iran were met with authorities at the border, they were sent to a quarantine facility for 40 days for fear of carrying the Covid-19 virus, which is above the required 14 days.<sup>21</sup> With little access to information and no medical care compared to their Sunni counterparts, some believe they were targeted as Shias. Saeeda, aged 50, claimed that “when traders and pilgrims who did not look like Hazaras were sent home shortly after they crossed the border, [we] understood it had to do something with [our Hazara identity].”<sup>22</sup> Later, two senior federal ministers, both Shia, were singled out as having organized a campaign to spread the virus further. The pandemic, therefore, further spread disinformation and resulted in the opportunity to scapegoat Shias as the sole carriers of the pandemic. For other minorities, the pandemic did not offer any respite either. In the context of increasing deprivation and poverty, certain organisations responsible for handing out meals to homeless and seasonal workers during the pandemic – refused to give ration cards to people belonging to religious minority groups.<sup>23</sup> Digitally, the government continues to encroach on civil liberties by using Cell Site Location Information and Call Data Records to access users’ personal data and send out COVID-related alert messages. For already vulnerable minorities in the country, this increased access to data may result in closer surveillance.

## b. Legal context of persecution of religious minorities

Protections afforded to religious minorities by the Constitution of Pakistan include:

- Article 20: Freedom to profess religion and to manage religious institutions
- Article 22: Safeguards as to educational institutions in respect of religion, etc.
- Article 25A: Equality of citizens
- Article 26: Non-discrimination in respect of access to public spaces
- Article 36: Protection of minorities



The constitutional protections available to religious minorities may well be in place. However, the impact of those protections has not been felt by the communities as strongly as envisioned. In fact, the Constitution itself has been discriminatory in the context of certain groups and is in contradiction of its own Article 33.

Article 33 of the Constitution of Pakistan states:

33. 'The State shall discourage parochial, racial, tribal sectarian and provincial prejudices among the citizens.'

Apart from using domestic law to prosecute, which will be discussed at length below, there is also the ever-increasing issue of forced conversions of minorities to Islam. Here, the person in question, usually a minor is coerced into changing their religion and stating that they did it of their own volition, such as in the case of Pumy Muskan<sup>4</sup> a 14-year-old Christian girl who was kept from her mother. Legally this admission by the minor is of no consequence, as they do not have the capacity, by law, to consent to such a decision without the express approval of their parent or guardian.

The final decision in *Nasra v Judicial Magistrate* then became:

'Pumy Muskan is barely 14 years old. As she is not sui juris she lacks legal capacity to change religion on her own. However, the question of faith being a matter of heart and one's conviction, no Court can declare her conversion invalid or void. It can only refuse to recognize or give effect to it for certain legal purposes. The Petitioner being the lawful guardian of Pumy Muskan is entitled to her custody. There is no reason to deprive her of that right.'

Order of the Court:

In view of the foregoing, this petition is accepted and the custody of Pummy Muskan is handed over to the Petitioner.’<sup>25</sup>



For many of the conversions, however, the result is disparagingly negative.<sup>26</sup> The minor is declared to be 18 years of age and thus able and willing to make her own decisions in terms of faith. In a setup that is deeply patriarchal and where the autonomy of girls and women over their own life is negligible to none, it is highly unlikely for minors to be able to make such decisions on their own.

There is a long history of unfair prosecution of minorities in Pakistan. The last decade itself has included harrowing cases of abuse of power, resulting in undeserving shacklement and public censure. In particular, the cases of Asia Bibi<sup>27</sup> and Patras Masih<sup>28</sup> were prominently reported across the media in Pakistan. However, there are many unnamed individuals who have been murdered or are still in jail. Often blasphemy charges are weaponized to target minority groups, particularly section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code which states:

‘Use of derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet: Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine.’

A landmark Supreme Court Decision in June 2014 directed the government to take various measures to protect the rights of religious minorities, as well as the establishment of a National Commission on Human Rights in 2015. Some of these measures include:

- Mandated the government to constitute a task force at the federal level to work out a strategy to promote religious tolerance.
- Called on the government to set up a National Council of Minorities Rights to monitor the practical realization of the rights and safeguards provided to the minorities under the Constitution.
- Prosecute those who distribute intolerant propaganda.
- Protect religious minority children who are persecuted at school, develop objective learning curricula, and enforce an affirmative action quota in the job sector.
- Asked to frame policy recommendations for safeguarding and protecting minorities’ rights.

However, six years have passed since the SC judgment but there has been no implementation on the directives.

In addition, discourse around the law is heavily politicised in Pakistan and can often lead to extra-judicial and vigilante violence. In January of 2011, the sitting provincial Governor Salman Taseer was killed by his guard for calling for reform of the blasphemy laws. The murderer, Mumtaz Qadri, received a substantial amount of support and exaltation<sup>29</sup> which increased manifold even after his death sentence was carried out by the State.



In 2013, scholar Junaid Hafeez was accused of blasphemy in the online space and arrested. A year later in 2014, his lawyer Rashid Rehman<sup>30</sup> was murdered after receiving many threats over legally representing Hafeez. Hafeez who was a lecturer at the Bahauddin Zakaria University (BZU) of Multan, was accused of defaming the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) on social media. This case caught national attention due to Hafeez's status as a Fulbright scholar and the involvement of social media as the platform for the alleged act of blasphemy. It also highlighted the collapsing distinctions between offline and online spaces, marking the beginning of the era of digital blasphemy.

In February of 2017, a 16-year old Christian was accused of blasphemy and denied bail<sup>31</sup> for the offence of 'liking and sharing' a post on Facebook that was believed to be 'defamatory and disrespectful' of the Kaaba. In 2017 an Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) handed out a death sentence to Taimoor Raza, a Shi'ite, who was held to be guilty of allegedly playing blasphemous content on his phone at a bus terminal. Anti Terrorism Court (ATC) trials are often held in-camera, making it difficult to monitor any procedural or human rights irregularities. Even though blasphemy is an offence of the penal code, it was tried by the ATC by linking charges of counter-terrorism to the alleged hate speech.<sup>32</sup>

These incidents are among many others and illustrate the ways in which the law is used and weaponised to rights such as freedom of expression and religious expression. The latest confirmed numbers available as of 2014, a total of 633 Muslims, 494 Ahmadis, 187 Christians and 21 Hindus have been accused under various provisions on offences related to religion since 1987, as per the National Commission of Justice and Peace (NCJP)<sup>33</sup>

It is to be noted that the offence originates in Pre-Partition India in 1835 where the two main religions, Hinduism and Islam co-existed under British rule and were often at odds with each other. The wording, presumably alluding to any remarks against the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were added later on in 1927 after multiple instances of religious tension over disrespect of pivotal figures.

'It is a fact that after independence any attack from Hindus minority on the religious feelings of Muslim diminished. However, the Ahmadi-Muslim controversy again revitalised the issue within Muslims to compel the government to bring changes in Blasphemy law, a chapter of PPC dealing with Offences Relating to Religion' state Mahmood and Chishti.<sup>34</sup>

Post-partition, when Muslims constituted a majority of the population, was further amended by military dictator General Zia-ul-Haq in 1986 to add provisions to a mandatory death sentence to the offence under section 295C.

Another pivotal element in the legal landscape is that of the provisions outlawing hate speech. Hate speech is penalised in Pakistani law through the following legislations:

**1. Pakistan Penal Code s. 153(A) and s. 505(2)**

**2. Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA 2016) s. 11**

The PPC defines it as the publishing of a statement, rumour or report that intends to cause feelings of enmity or ill-will on the basis of religion. PECA defines hate speech as any speech that advances or is likely to advance interfaith, sectarian or racial hatred.

Internationally, the concern over the rights of religious minorities in Pakistan is well-documented with organizations such as Amnesty International and Minority Rights Group International. Additionally, the US Department of State's 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom on Pakistan stated:

'On December 18, the Secretary of State redesignated Pakistan as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, as amended, for having engaged in or tolerated particularly severe violations of religious freedom...'

The overall level of confidence in the state to be respectful and protective of its minorities is therefore low. The following section adds to the image the country has fostered with its actions:

## International obligations



This section notes the international treaties and conventions Pakistan has ratified and/or is signatory to that obligate member countries to protect the rights of their religious minorities and is violating through the multiple instances noted throughout this study:

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>35</sup>
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, ratified 2010)<sup>36</sup>
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR, ratified in 2008)
- International Convention on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (ICERD, ratified 1966)
- Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, ratified 1966)
- Convention on Rights of the Child (CRC, ratified 1990)

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Technology's evil twin



The rise of social media, mobile and telecommunication devices have contributed to some of the most drastic social, political and economic changes in the last century, particularly in the fight for freedom of expression. With over 3.8 billion users worldwide, social media and internet usage is the most valuable currency in the world. Characteristic of a “modern” world, the internet provides people with a more comprehensive spread of information through which they form socio-political opinions and express their unique identities.<sup>37</sup> Shirky argues that social media has “revolutionised how people form political opinion” and made information more widely accessible than ever before.<sup>38</sup> Castells suggests that new technologies have produced a new “network society” that renegotiates concepts such as freedom and liberation.<sup>39</sup> The assumption underpinning these narratives is that new forms of internet technologies uniformly accelerated processes of empowerment and liberation in previously authoritarian contexts. In a cross-national study of 152 countries using data from 1994 - 2003, it was found that increased internet activity was a meaningful

indicator of more democratic regimes and that internet usage had a positive effect on democracy.<sup>40</sup> In Pakistan, such benefits are reflected through the creation of private “safe spaces” for religious minorities to exercise their faith, express opinions and build networks when it is unsafe to take traditional routes. For example, the Nawa-e-Masihi, an online platform catering to the Pakistani Christian community, shares regular updates and produces reports on relevant issues related to them.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the Pakistan Hindu Youth Forum page on Facebook has been salient in the mobilisation of support and organization of protests around the murder of student Nimrita Kumari in September 2019.<sup>42</sup>

However, in spite of the growing importance of social media in the creation of safe spaces and promotion of human rights, the dangers of social media are never far from purview. UNESCO’s 2010 report states: “freedom of expression is not an inevitable outcome of technological innovation. It can be diminished or reinforced by the design of technologies, policies and practices – sometimes far removed from freedom of expression”<sup>43</sup> The undeniable reality is that states continue to impose censorship and media blackouts against their populations to suppress groups that use such technology. In places like Sudan, Egypt and Hong Kong, governments have made efforts to impose social media blocks and censor information to quell uprisings in their respective countries.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, in 2019, the United Nations released a joint letter stating that “the rhetoric of hatred must be countered, as it has real-life consequences. Studies have established a correlation between exposure to hate speech and the number of hate crimes committed”.<sup>45</sup>

Delving deeper into these dangers, a Propublica report found that Facebook rules on content moderation relating to hate speech were inconsistently applied by contractors, favouring elites and governments over minorities and activists.<sup>46</sup> If such algorithmic inconsistencies are applied to the Pakistani context, the online hatred and persecution of religious minorities becomes explicitly emboldened. For example, a 2020 report by Freedom House, documenting how governments censor and control the digital spheres, categorised Pakistan as “Not Free” as it fulfilled 7 of the 9 conditions for total internet control.

## Pakistan and the persecution of religious minorities

In the context of existing precarity, the expansion of the public sphere into the online dimension exacerbates many of the same tensions found in the daily lives of religious minorities living in Pakistan. It comes as little surprise that a 2019 International Media Support report found that overall media coverage of minorities does not include their own opinions or perspectives, limiting reports to sensitive themes such as blasphemy.<sup>47</sup> Finally, a report by IRADA found that all respondents from religious minorities reported facing hate speech and harassment for their online activism including threats, stalking and hacking.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, respondents identified the issue of religious minorities as one of the most provocative themes online that elicit the most hostile speech for users. Syed and Ali offer a “pyramid of hate” perspective to explain religious hatred and discrimination. They argue that the experiences of Shia professionals in Pakistan can be understood through the pyramid involving biased

attitudes, biased actions, discrimination, ultimately resulting in violence and genocide.<sup>49</sup> If such a perspective is extended into the online sphere, the same patterns and trends are reflected back. For example, Ahmed argues that those who in the past produced biased literature against minorities have now turned to online spaces, reaching “a wider audience than in the mosque or people who subscribe to such literature. It is being amplified through clicks, comments and shares on social media”.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, the biased attitudes and acts online transform into direct acts of violence against minorities. A notable case was the 2014 murder of three Ahmedi family members in an arson attack over a defamatory Facebook post.<sup>51</sup> 2017 saw the first death sentence issued for “digital blasphemy” against Taimoor Raza, a Shia Muslim from Bahawalpur.<sup>52</sup> The setting for his alleged blasphemy was Facebook. The extension of the blasphemy law into the online sphere in 2016. This application, coupled with state-led censorship and surveillance of internet technologies, has led to an escalation of direct and indirect violence against the most vulnerable subsections of society. For instance, Amir, in charge of the Ahmadiyya media cell in Pakistan, talks of the state overtly blocking websites that celebrate Ahmadiyya contributions to the creation of Pakistan.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, a Shia watchdog site documenting cases of Shia killings in the country was also banned.<sup>54</sup> Corroborating this, Diebert and Rohozinski state: “surveillance systems penetrate every aspect of life, as people implicitly (and perhaps unwittingly) consent to the greatest invasion of personal privacy in history.”<sup>55</sup> Digital information can be easily tracked and traced, and then tied to specific individuals who themselves can be mapped in space and time with a degree of sophistication that would make the greatest tyrants of days past envious.”

# Women and religious persecution



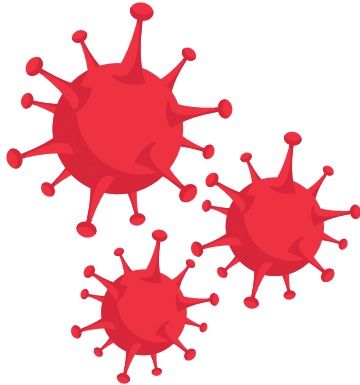
Women from religious minority groups also face a specific type of gendered religious persecution, first as victims of a male-dominated society and secondly, as religious minorities in a majoritarian society. Women from Christian, Hindu, Shia and Ahmedi groups in Pakistan continue to face the worst forms of abuse; targeted primarily as the most vulnerable subsection of their respective identity groups. Rape, sexual abuse, harassment, abductions and forced conversions are only some of the crimes committed against women from religious minorities. This is exacerbated by weak accountability mechanisms, growing illiteracy and lack of opportunities for economic mobility within these already deprived communities. For example, the Asian Human Rights Commission reports that 87 percent of Scheduled Caste Hindu women are illiterate compared to 63.5 per 109 cents of males in their community.<sup>56</sup> In addition, Maheshwary writes on how poor Hindu men and women “face discrimination when they apply for jobs and are mostly offered menial work of cleaning or washing the bathroom” even when they are more qualified for senior positions.<sup>57</sup> In her study, she found that “religious 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.” However, if the male respondents were removed from this table, gender discrimination within the community and society was ranked number one overall at 97 per cent.<sup>58</sup>

The intersection between religious minority status and poverty is also reflected in the experiences of Ahmadi women. A study by MK found that poor Ahmadi women generally refrain from revealing their religious affiliation for fear of persecution.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, the study establishes the inextricable link between poverty and religious affiliation by showing how poverty exacerbates already existent vulnerability linked to minority status in Pakistan.<sup>60</sup>

Such precarity and vulnerability are not solely reserved for Hindu and Ahmadi communities but finds itself reproduced in the experiences of other religious minority groups as well. For example, Suleman investigates the inequalities found in the daily lives of Christian women and girls. In his study, he found that a majority of female respondents (81 percent) shared that they face religious discrimination at their workplace.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, a majority of respondents from both female and male groups (94 percent and 100 percent) stated that “poor Christian women are primarily only considered for sanitation work, whether at the domestic level or in any institution.”<sup>62</sup> Moreover, 97 per cent of respondents from the female group reported that invitations/offers to convert to Islam have become part and parcel of their life.<sup>63</sup> This effectively illustrates the precarious nature of women’s status within society as well as their own communities. Such cases of discrimination, violence, surveillance, and censorship have undoubtedly been exacerbated due to the COVID 19 pandemic.



# COVID 19 and the scapegoating of religious minorities online



Non-consensual data regulation and poor regulation signal further fears for minority groups in Pakistan. As such, “a new dispensation regarding data available to the state post the pandemic might mean that these communities feel the need to retreat further into isolation, trading only amongst their own communities and no longer able to feel part of Pakistan’s society as a whole<sup>68</sup>”. It is within this troubling context that an investigation into the experiences of religious minorities in the online world becomes imperative.

The onset of a global pandemic threatening the world’s population was understood to possibly unite communities in solidarity for common suffering. However, as Morthost acutely notes, the COVID 19 crisis accelerated a process of minority “othering”, involving the demonization of ethnic and religious minorities for the alleged spread of the virus.<sup>64</sup> The World Health Organization fittingly referred to this as an “infodemic” involving the unnecessary scapegoating of religious minorities.<sup>65</sup> For example, the COVID crisis exacerbated sectarian tensions when a number of Shia pilgrims in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan tested positive for coronavirus on their return from Iran.<sup>66</sup> In this way, the COVID crisis has laid bare the underlying tensions and structural inequalities between minorities in various contexts. Online, these tensions continue to contribute to minority victimisations. For example, the Pakistani government has been accused of accessing personal data of smartphone users and tracking their social media engagements to target coronavirus alert messages without the users’ consent.<sup>67</sup>

# FINDINGS

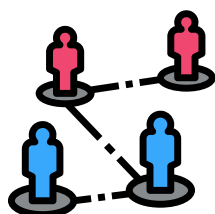


The findings below document the responses from the survey and are supported by data collected from follow-up interviews with participants.

## Participant demographics

In our initial data gathering, a survey was used which collected 113 responses from individuals from religious minorities. Of those 113 responses, 35 were male, 75 were female and 2 individuals identified as non-binary. A large cohort of respondents (51) were between the ages of 18-25, followed by 44 people in the 25-35-year-old bracket. 15 respondents were in the 36-45 age range while 1 and 2 persons were in the 46-55 and 56 and above range respectively.

The respondents covered a range of religious minority groups. Out of 113 respondents, 49 identified themselves as from the Shia Muslim sect. The second largest group consisted of 26 Christian respondents. 13 Ahmadis and 12 Hindus identified themselves within the survey. 2 individuals from the Bahai community and 2 Atheists also contributed to this data. Finally, 9 individuals completed the survey but did not specify their minority religion within the survey.



## Internet usage among participants

The survey also asked participants how much time they spent online. 56 individuals reported spending 7-8 hours online daily, followed by 54 individuals who reported spending a “couple of hours daily” online. 2 respondents spent time online infrequently while 1 spent a couple of hours every week. A follow-up question asked which online platforms they used most. A majority of respondents used a combination of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. 96 individuals reported using Facebook and Instagram. 65 individuals use Twitter, while 20 mentioned using blogs like WordPress and Medium. 15 participants mentioned using TikTok while 4 specified using Snapchat. Other options mentioned included LinkedIn, Pinterest, and online news publications. Notably, 75 respondents stated that their profiles on social media were public, while 38 kept their profiles private. Respondents were mostly public on Twitter (52), followed by Facebook (35) and Instagram (34).



## Self expression online

When asked whether they feel comfortable expressing their opinion online, 38.9% of respondents answered in the affirmative, while 34.5% said no. Conversely, 26.5% said they were unsure about whether they felt comfortable or not. The follow up question asked why those who were not comfortable felt so. One major reason provided by respondents was fear of persecution and lack of safety. Participants mentioned a fear of being bashed by strangers online and lack of institutional support for them in online spaces, including fear of being accused of blasphemy. One participant stated that they did not feel comfortable because they did not want to be “on the receiving end of a lynch mob”. The theme of lynching and lynch mobs was brought up by other respondents as well. They also mentioned a fear of criticising the rising extremism levels and hateful content online. Fear was also related frequently to the translation of online hate into real life, including fear for their friends’ and family’s safety. Notably, those that mentioned being unsure of their comfort levels still responded to the follow up with reasons including judgement from friends, fear of harassment, false allegations and misinterpretation. One respondent mentioned being told by their parents from a young age not to share their opinions online because it may lead to a “critical situation”.

“Exposing your sect is like exposing your vulnerability.” [P8]

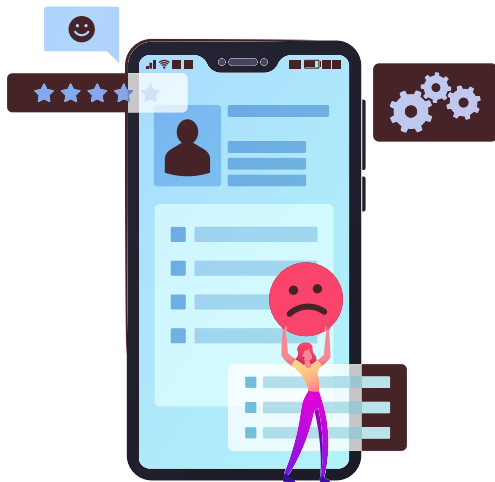
“I want to be able to express myself, but I can’t, mainly because of my family... I’m always second guessing and doubting myself” [P12]

Interestingly, 77 respondents stated that they had revealed their religious affiliation online, while 14 said they did not because they didn’t feel it was important. 16 respondents stated they refrained from sharing this information for security reasons while 6 noted that their minority status had been revealed involuntarily. When asked whether they were comfortable stating their religious affiliations online or have them associated with their digital identity, 63 people responded with the affirmative out of which two shared that they are only comfortable to state their religious identity on their private profiles.

“I’ve made two accounts on twitter; one where I say whatever I want and then another account where I moderate myself.” [P11]



## Experiences with online negativity



A majority (57.5%) of respondents mentioned that they had some experience of online negativity, including backlash or threats on the basis of religious affiliation and/or a combination of factors. Forms of online negativity ranged from receiving negative comments and derogatory language to daily abuse and threats to their life. A majority of respondents mentioned being subject to abusive language and death threats for posting their opinions online. Notably, of the 83 respondents who stated that their religious affiliation was revealed online, - through voluntary and involuntary means - 55% stated that they had experienced some form of online abuse. Several respondents mentioned having their online friends bully them and harass them, while others mentioned having online threats actualise into real life consequences. For example, one person elaborated on being cornered and bullied in school as a result of their religious affiliation being revealed. Another recalled having lost a job due to repeated phone calls to their employer and threats to their life.

"When we give our opinions on something and people don't like it, people turn it against it. We don't have laws protecting us for that." [P1]

"If someone has an issue with a post of mine, I just remove it. Even if I have to compromise my views, I remove it to avoid violence." [P6]

"All online materials are closely monitored. You can't find anti-Islamic content anywhere. But you can find anti-minorities content freely. Even online but also physically, in mosques sermons, they instigate violence." [P4]

A follow up question asked them to discuss on the way they navigate online negativity, particularly whether online negativity has led them to reduce their usage of online spaces or restrict expressing their personal opinions. 55 participants stated that they had reduced their online usage to some extent, while 50 said they did not. 7 were unsure, while 1 stated that it depends on the specific issues at hand.

"They don't understand that if we are openly sharing information, they shouldn't totally resort to what they assume they know. For that reason, I had to limit my social space and the information I share so as to not disturb that space." [P3]

"Recently when the blasphemy-related murder happened in Peshawar, my Hindu friend posted about it - saying that the punishment was conducted in the wrong way - and he was shamed so much that he had to leave social media." [P6]

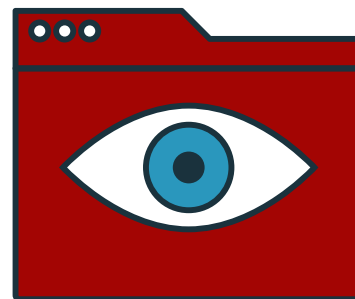
"Even your closest friend will say that you are different, that they are privileged and closer to God. So, even in those discussions about social issues, our views are invalidated because of our religion and you can't say anything because you know the consequences." [P6]

Participants were then asked to elaborate on the impact such negativity and its consequences have had on their mental, personal and professional life. Several respondents stated that they suffered from depression, anxiety and chronic stress in their lives due to the persecution they face online. Some mentioned receiving therapy and taking medicines to cope with their mental trauma. Others stated having lower confidence, insecurity and a “constant feeling of vulnerability”. One person suggested that they second guess their own opinions and experiences as a result of online negativity, while another noted taking extra precautions not to reveal their name or location anywhere. Frustration at not being able to take part in socio-political discourse was also frequently mentioned in the responses. Notably, one participant said they felt they were living a “double life” because of being unable to share their religious opinions and feelings with their close friends. Those who stated that it doesn’t have an impact also explained that this is because they simply refrain from expressing themselves, choosing to remain limited and non expressive online to protect themselves.

“It’s an anxiety-inducing battle because the online should be a safe space. It is not a place for harassment. Once you turn off your private mode and your DMs are open, it becomes really disturbing.” [P11]

“You always have to justify your existence. It’s really frustrating to always justify actions and opinions.” [P12]

## Online privacy



Regarding the importance of online privacy, 72 participants said they considered online privacy very important and felt vulnerable if their data was not protected. 39 said online privacy was important because they feel ownership of their own data while 2 stated that they were indifferent because they don’t know much about the issue. In the follow-up question asking for reasons, respondents named fear of violence and harassment as a major reason. They elaborated on the lack of protection available to them. Additionally, they elaborated that they fear hacking of their accounts, abuse of their information, and mishandling of their personal details. Another question asked whether they or anyone in their community had experienced a breach of their online privacy. 42.5% of the respondents stated yes while 57.5% said no. When asked to elaborate further, they stated that many had had their personal accounts hacked, their data leaked to various platforms including social media forums and private Whatsapp group chats. One mentioned having their full name and address leaked and circulated in social and print media while another mentioned someone having had false and doctored blasphemous content being made. Other issues included blackmailing, private safe groups being infiltrated. Real life consequences were also mentioned including stalking, receiving threatening notes, and getting threatening visits to their homes.



A final question on this theme asked whether online privacy was more important for religious minorities as opposed to majority groups. 90 participants agreed that it was more important for minorities, while 8 said no. A further 13 said they were unsure and 2 respondents said online privacy was important for everyone.

"There's no online check and balance either. They can say anything they want about us and no one will ask them why they said it." [P3]

"If the Muslim community shows support for the Ahmedi person who was recently killed, then its fine but I can't say or do the same. I can't say India and Pakistan are brothers, but my Muslim friends can say it. If I do, I'll be called a RAW agent." [P6]

## Women



The survey also asked whether respondents considered women to be at more risk of receiving online threats and negativity. 59 people said they were unsure, while 50 people agreed that women receive more threats online. 2 respondents said no, while 1 person said it was equally bad for both genders. Finally, 1 person stated that women face threats generally, but they could not specify a case where it was worse in the online sphere. The lack of clarity regarding women's experiences within the community was also reflected in answers during the secondary data set, where several participants stated that they had no personal experiences of witnessing the specific targeting of women on the basis of gender and religion. However, other participants mentioned that the sad reality is that minority women face abuse and threats from both people from the majority as well as men in their own community.

"Women do face more online violence at the hands of these keyboard jihadi men. We are becoming more and more scared of the outside world and men in general. And no, we are not able to talk about these issues or any issues freely." [P8]

"I hate to admit it, but women do face more abuse. The basic reason is lack of education and especially within the minority community, it happens because of lack of resources and education." [P9]

## Awareness of legal frameworks



The final survey question asked participants whether they were aware of the laws regulating online activities and freedom of speech online. This question garnered mixed results, with 37 participants stating they were aware, while 33 stating they were not aware. A significant number of participants (42) stated that they knew a little bit about the laws and 1 participant specified wanting to know more about the legal framework. Regarding institutional structures, the follow-up interviews asked participants if they would be comfortable approaching law enforcement agencies with their concerns if they were the target of such abuse. Several respondents mentioned not feeling comfortable with the institutional set up as well as the legal frameworks in place to protect them.

"The agencies specifically – I've had the experience of working with them - handle everything professionally. Especially the FIA online portals are very friendly and if you want to report them, they are good at that." [P9]

"I wouldn't go and I wouldn't recommend it to other girls. If they have sensitive information involved, then I would recommend going to private firms instead." [P11]

"Law enforcement is not competent and the system is too weak to prevent law enforcers from biases against minorities" [P2]

# RECOMMENDATIONS



## From the religious minorities' community

Over the course of this research, we interviewed Pakistanis who belonged to religious minorities and asked them, towards the end, for their input on what could be done to improve the situation they found themselves in, referring to the proverbial eggshells they walk on daily, due to the precarious nature of their identities. Here, we will list the key themes and actions they felt were necessary to take action on if the situation is to be improved:

### Awareness building

- Using internet forums to bring awareness to the society about the different religions that exist in Pakistan, instead of erasing their identities in school curriculums. There is a need for general public awareness as well, not just through the education system. The overall intolerance in society needs to be tackled along with religious intolerance.
- Awareness among the general public about what constitutes unacceptable online behaviour and laws that govern these spaces.
- Awareness-building efforts need to be linked to misinformation and disinformation about minority religions and sects. Many participants expressed the need for an educating campaign that dispels these misconceptions.

### Transparency and Accountability

- The state needs to be forthcoming and transparent about the proceedings and efforts it has taken in curtailing of hate speech. Increased awareness of laws and rights, without concrete action and implementation, will be a hollow effort.
- Transparency about efforts will help build confidence in these institutions and allow for more informed debates of these issues. For instance, regulatory bodies tasked with addressing hate speech need to publish statistics on the number of complaints received regarding hate speech of minorities along with the number of cases acted upon.
- There needs to be mechanisms of accountability for state institutions to ensure checks and balances to prevent effects of possible biases in the implementation of laws and regulations. Clear and transparent mechanisms for reporting discriminatory behaviour in the dispensation of public services need to be instituted.

- Government institutions are encouraged to perform and public annual human audits which include inclusion minorities, programs to address gaps in minority rights and efforts to incorporate minority rights into the agenda of each department.

## **Religious leaders and relevant government ministries**

- There needs to be a sincere effort in advancing interfaith harmony by using awareness to change mindsets and misheld beliefs. Unambiguous rhetoric along with policy changes that brings together leaders from all religious faiths, without any exclusions, is needed.

## **Clamping down on anti-minorities content both online and offline**

- Material inciting violence and entrenching discrimination against minorities needs to be regulated through due process. Material widely disseminated online but also physically, through the publication of books, pamphlets as well as mosque sermons needs to be addressed directly. Furthermore, regulatory bodies for print and electronic media need to take anti-minority speech and representation very seriously.
- Online hate speech and anti-minority pages, accounts, and posts need to be taken seriously as they foment ideas regarding discrimination and marginalisation that spill over into violent acts. However, regulation of online spaces and speech should be conducted through a human rights framework. Ultimately, content moderation without proper safeguards for free speech leads

to censorship and silencing of the same communities it should protect. Inclusion of minority groups in these decision-making bodies is important to ensure decisions that benefit the community in the long-term.

- Hate speech should be removed from textbooks, talking about Hindu, Sikh, Christian and Ahmedi heroes of history as well and teaching children to recognise contributions of all faiths.

## **Free speech protected for all**

- Despite constitutional protections, free speech is not experienced uniformly, particularly by marginalised populations. For religious minorities, the right to information and freedom of speech is essentially non-existent in Pakistan.
- There is a need to revise existing laws that disproportionately impact minority groups and discriminate against religious minorities. For online spaces there is a need to review criminal defamation (section 20) and content moderation (section 37) sections of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 to ensure compliance with international human rights frameworks.

## Counter-speech

- While regulation of hate speech is an important aspect of making spaces safer for minority groups, it is important to ensure that counter-narratives that affirm the rights, contributions and humanity of religious minority groups should also be developed.
- Experiences of discrimination and marginalisation need to be documented and made available to the general public, it is important to tell stories that stem from these experiences to sensitise the public.

## Accountability

- After repeated calls for accountability and a dedicated and independent commission, the Federal Cabinet created the National Commission on Minorities (NCM) however at its outset the decision to oust the Ahmadiyya community from the list of minority communities only served to highlight the discrimination that they go through on a daily basis in Pakistan.<sup>69</sup> The Commission's proposed constitution was rejected by minority rights groups in a joint statement, citing the irreconcilability of the document with the 2014 decision of the Supreme Court and the Paris Principles.<sup>70</sup>
- Additionally, the creation of the NCM by the Federal Cabinet meant that the Commission was effectively toothless as minority issues were the domain of provincial governments following the 18th Amendment to the Constitution of Pakistan. The efficacy of the Commission, resultantly, is questionable at best.<sup>71</sup> The need now is for a better, inclusive and progressive method to be enacted to listen to the complaints of minorities with confidentiality and review them as well as act on them urgently as lives could be in danger.

to censorship and silencing of the same communities it should protect. Inclusion of minority groups in these decision-making bodies is important to ensure decisions that benefit the community in the long-term.

- Hate speech should be removed from textbooks, talking about Hindu, Sikh, Christian and Ahmedi heroes of history as well and teaching children to recognise contributions of all faiths.

## More responsive law enforcement bodies

- Reporting hate speech should be made easier and accessible, particularly keeping in mind the oppressive relationship members of minority groups have with law enforcement. Processes need to be made citizen-friendly, minority-sensitive, and quicker to deal with the rapid dissemination of content as it happens online.

## Inclusivity

- Representation of minority groups in all aspects of life, from public service to the media is important in slowly changing attitudes. Furthermore, having minority members in positions of power and decision-making leads to more nuanced and inclusive decisions that can impact the lives of both minority and majority populations.



## Recommendations for civil society

- Awareness-raising campaigns at a mass scale, to counter misinformation, exclusion and bust myths and defamatory beliefs against any religious minorities
- Urge the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief and the Special Rapporteur on freedom of expression to raise the issue of the abusive use of the blasphemy laws with the government of Pakistan with a view to immediately establishing procedural safeguards on the application of these laws.<sup>72</sup>
- A coalition of civil society organizations interested in advancing the cause of religious minorities must be formed so it can serve as an effective and substantial platform to rally around any instances of rights violations

## Recommendations for the State

- Recognition of Pakistan's international human rights norms, ratification, and ensuing international obligations must be taught to the judiciary and law enforcement agencies that deal with such cases
- Recognition of possible mental illness in a person accused of blasphemy must be made possible by training first responders to such a case
- Laws must be enacted to protect witnesses in cases involving blasphemy to ensure fair trials
- Human rights-compliant monitoring of online spaces for religiously-motivated hate speech, incitement of violence
- Inclusion of sections/subject on all minorities in Pakistan to combat the spread of misinformation
- Ensure legal representation or access to such representation for any person accused of blasphemy charges
- Fair trial, as per legal definition and international practice, must be given to anyone accused of blasphemy

# Recommendations for social media platforms:

- Investment of resources in comprehensive content moderation, including monitoring, regulation and removal of online hate speech, misinformation and violent/graphic images and videos
- Understanding cultural and linguistic complications tied to the abuse, hate speech and threats faced by religious minorities online. Much of the hateful content posted online is in languages other than English, and therefore, take longer to report and remove. More must be done to ensure that all forms of hate speech in all languages are being treated with the same urgency
- Adopt preventative measures such as actively initiating and bringing attention to issues tied to hate speech and digital violence against religious minorities in the online sphere. This could include providing resources and tools for further awareness and education on platforms where such problems are common
- Increased protection and privacy for vulnerable groups and online communities
- More transparency

# CONCLUSION

Our findings, combined with the individual statements we collected from our participants paint a bleak picture of the online experiences of religious minorities in Pakistan. It is pertinent to not only encourage reflection amongst society at large, but also to call on the state to take responsibility for the protection of minorities and their rights. As online spaces are becoming more contested, a progressive and inclusive approach for all citizens is the only way to ensure an environment where the rights of all are protected, regardless of caste or creed.



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