



COUNTERING ONLINE MISINFORMATION AGAINST RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN PAKISTAN

POLICY BRIEF



DigitalRightsFoundation
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ABOUT

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Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is a women-led, 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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INTRODUCTION

The increase in the use of social media has led to more opportunities for people to share their opinions and connect with others online. However, it has also led to an increase¹ in the spread of hate speech and online harassment, especially targeted towards religious minorities in Pakistan. Many instances of hate speech and incitement to violence against minorities often coincide with misinformation,² and the often organized nature means that it takes the form of disinformation as well.³ Religious minorities targeted by extremist groups and individuals are starting to use social media platforms, among other means, to spread hateful content. These issues are exasperated by the fact that religious minorities may also face censorship and limitations on their freedom of expression on social media. As a result, disinformation is allowed to be disseminated without any counter-narrative or accountability, leading to further marginalization and polarization in society. These issues can have a serious impact on the safety⁴ and well-being of religious minorities⁵.

On one hand, disinformation and hate campaigns are becoming more prevalent and organized, on the other, religious minority communities often lack the awareness and capacity to address the misinformation narratives and campaigns—allowing for false and harmful information to remain unchecked. This is particularly harmful during periods of sustained political activity, such as elections⁶.

1. OHCHR. (2021, March 23). Report: Online hate increasing against minorities. OHCHR. Retrieved January 24, 2023, from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/stories/2021/03/report-online-hate-increasing-against-minorities-says-expert>

2. Rights, M. (2022, December 7). India: The dissemination of misinformation on WhatsApp is driving vigilante violence against minorities. Minority Rights Group. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://minorityrights.org/programmes/library/trends2020/india/>

3. Reuters. (2022, October 4). How tweets, lies from India fuelled Leicester unrest. The Express Tribune. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2380094/how-tweets-lies-from-india-fuelled-leicester-unrest>

4. Suleman, N. (2022, August 30). From exclusion to violence: The case of religious minorities in Pakistan. Minority Rights Group. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://minorityrights.org/2022/08/23/pakistan-forb-2022/>

5. Hasan, M., Graver, D. van, Thomas-Noone, B., & Pargoo, M. (2019, February 20). Minorities under attack in Bangladesh. Lowy Institute. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/minorities-under-attack-bangladesh>

6. Nellis, G. (2022). Election cycles and global religious intolerance. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 120(1). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2213198120>

In many instances, there is a direct link between online harassment and offline violence^{7 8}.

The complex nature of the problem at hand calls for a multistakeholder approach to combat online misinformation and disinformation: the state, social media platforms, civil society organizations, policymakers, as well as religious majority and minority communities themselves must work jointly. It is also important to note that given the structural underpinnings of this problem, there's no single solution to the task at hand. Consequently, Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) and Canadian Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) collaborated to address these issues through a community-led approach culminating in this policy brief. This document has been developed through feedback from 4 one-day training workshops in different cities across Pakistan (Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad and Peshawar) with more than 90 people from different religious minority communities. The aim of these workshops was to build the capacity of religious minority groups to identify misinformation, document disinformation trends and counter false information online. Participants were also asked to report their experiences with misinformation on the internet through awareness of laws and platform-based reporting flows.

7. Zakaria, R. (2014, June 6). The Facebook faithful. Dawn.com. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1088533>

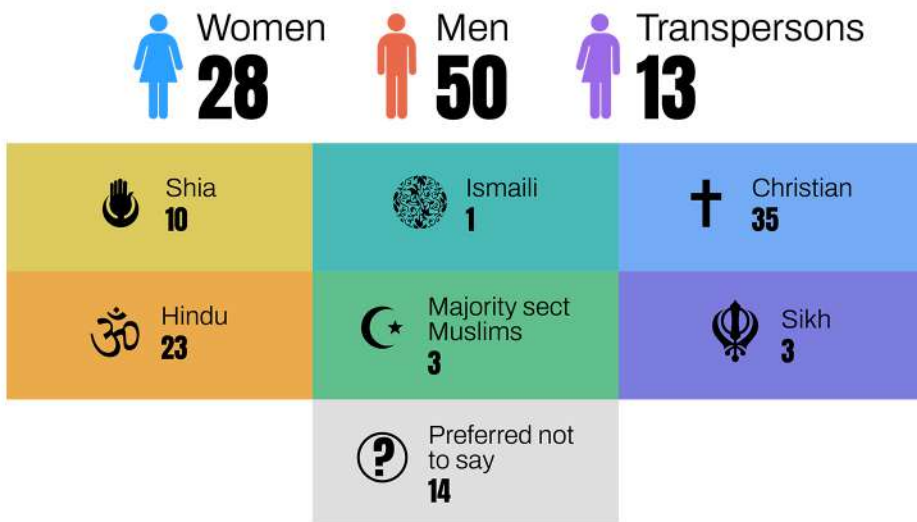
8. Gillani, W. (2014, July 28). 3 killed in a facebook blasphemy rampage in Pakistan. The New York Times. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/29/world/asia/3-pakistanis-die-as-facebook-photo-sets-off-muslim-rampage.html>

METHODOLOGY

This policy brief has been developed through consultative sessions held with communities as part of DRF's workshops and semi-structured interviews with digital rights experts and key members of religious minority communities.

The workshops held for this project followed a highly interactive training workshop model. They covered topics such as the effects of misinformation, digital legal rights, fact-checking, content moderation, reporting mechanisms, and digital well-being. In addition, in each city, participants were invited to share their lived online experiences of misinformation and disinformation, and the impact on their community and their own lives. This consultation was an essential part of the research and greatly informed the findings.

People from various religions in Pakistan were represented in the workshops. For the purposes of this research, Shia Muslims are also categorized as religious minorities in Pakistan as they face similar hostility and harassment in online spaces. However, not everyone could attend or was willing to attend due to personal safety concerns. Members from the transgender community also participated to ensure inclusivity of all genders. Overall, the breakdown of attendees was:



Following the training workshops, the principal researcher conducted five one-on-one interviews with digital rights experts and religious minority community leaders/activists to consolidate the workshop consultations and solidify the research's findings.

ONLINE MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION IN PAKISTAN AGAINST RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

Pakistan's religious minorities account for 3.7% of the population, according to the 2017 census⁹. Shia Muslims are estimated to make up 10 to 20% of Pakistan's population. It is important to note that these numbers may be imprecise due to the lack of official data on the religious affiliation of citizens, as well as the fact that estimates rely on self-reporting. As a result, while religious minorities constitute a small portion of online spaces in Pakistan, they are often disproportionately targeted by online misinformation, hate speech and harassment that bleeds into their offline lives, sometimes having lasting impact on future generations.

On the other hand, counter-misinformation measures taken by religious minorities are viewed as “anti-state”. Members of the Hindu community reported being called “Indian agents” for defending their religion, even so far as being accused of being affiliated with RAW (India’s intelligence wing, Research and Analysis Wing)¹⁰. These accusations are used as a device to discredit community members, thus reducing their ability to solidify counter-narratives. Sections 295, 296 and 297 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) against religious minorities are also weaponized¹¹ leading to self-censorship within the religious minority communities. Bad faith actors exploit this silence which is made worse by the anonymity and protection afforded by social media.

The normalization of violence against religious minorities, state inaction and proliferation of hate speech has meant that religious minorities in Pakistan have no choice but to live in the shadows for fear of being harmed for expressing their opinions. This has meant that many members of religious minorities

9. Fuchs, M.-M., & Fuchs, S. W. (2019). Religious minorities in Pakistan: Identities, citizenship and social belonging. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 43(1), 52–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2020.1695075>

10. Dev, K. (2015, June 24). I am a Hindu-and a proud Pakistani. Quartz. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://qz.com/india/435699/i-am-a-hindu-and-a-proud-pakistani>

11. Masood, S. (2023, January 21). Pakistan strengthens already harsh laws against blasphemy. The New York Times. Retrieved January 30, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/21/world/asia/pakistan-blasphemy-laws.html>

avoid participating in online spaces or hide their religious identity, which makes digital spaces less diverse and tolerant. While misinformation and hate speech is not a new phenomenon, technology and social media platforms have exacerbated the situation by providing elements of anonymity, the chance of gaining clout, instant virality and rapid dissemination of content. Misinformation is becoming more accessible in the digital age.

Everyday Realities of Religious Minorities Online

Online harassment

Religious minorities are targeted with harassment and hate speech online, particularly on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Harassment can include verbal abuse, death threats, and calls for violence against individuals or an entire group. Harassment online is also intersectional - women from religious minority communities are targeted based on both their gender and their religion¹².

Online misinformation/disinformation

Misinformation is defined as incorrect or misleading information spread without knowledge of its lack of veracity. **Rumors** are information not attributed to any particular source, and so are unreliable and often unverified, but can turn out to be either true or false.

Disinformation is false information deliberately spread with the intention to deceive people. It is sometimes confused with misinformation, which is false information but is not deliberate.

Religious minorities are the target of misinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories that spread false information about their beliefs or practices.

12. DRF. (2021, March). RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN ONLINE SPACES. Digital Rights Foundation. Retrieved January 2023, from <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Religious-Minorities.pdf>

Censorship

In Pakistan, religious minorities face state-sanctioned censorship or restriction of their online activities/content by regulatory bodies¹³. In 2017, the government blocked access to the website of the Ahmadiyya community on the grounds of "promoting religious hatred"¹⁴. The government has previously sent content removal requests to platforms such as Google to remove "Google Play apps related to or containing information regarding the Ahmadiyya community and their religious practices"¹⁵. Access to content regarding violations against minorities¹⁶ or documentation of discrimination is routinely blocked¹⁷.

Digital divide

Religious minorities, especially those from low-income backgrounds, may not have the same access to technology and the internet as others (due to lack of affordability of internet devices and packages as well as internet access in areas), which can limit their ability to communicate with others or access information. In many cases, religious minorities' access to websites that serve their community has been restricted or made unavailable¹⁸. Section 37 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (PECA) gives wide powers to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to block and remove content. In 2021, the National Assembly of Pakistan passed the Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards), Rules 2021 which introduced the requirement for internet and technology companies to open offices in the country, locate their servers within the country, and remove "objectionable" internet content within a specified timeframe. According to

13. Rajagopalan, M. (2021, February 4). Pakistan forced down apps made by a persecuted religious minority. BuzzFeed News. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meghara/pakistan-forced-down-ahmadiyya-apps>

14. Xynou, M., & Baloch, H. (2020, July 29). Internet censorship in Pakistan: Findings from 2014-2017. OONI. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://ooni.org/post/pakistan-internet-censorship/>

15. Google. (n.d.). Google Transparency Report. Google transparency report. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from https://transparencyreport.google.com/government-removals/government-requests/PK?hl=en&lu=country_request_explore&country_request_explore=p%3A2

16. Web Desk. (2012, July 14). Shia killing watchdog site apparently banned. The Express Tribune. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/408359/shia-killing-watchdog-site-apparently-banned>

17. A report on persecution of Ahmadis in Pakistan during the year 2015. Ahmadiyya. (2015). Retrieved January 25, 2023, from <https://www.ahmadiyya.ca/sites/default/files/annualnewsreport2015s.pdf>

18. Shahid, K. K. (2020, February 19). Amidst digital crackdown, religious minorities strive to create Safe Spaces Online. Digital Rights Monitor. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://digitalrightsmonitor.pk/amidst-digital-crackdown-religious-minorities-strive-to-create-safe-spaces-online/>

technology companies and religious minority activists, the definition of objectionable content in the rules is vague and subject to government interpretation¹⁹. Google is the first major tech company to register its offices in Pakistan under the Securities & Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP), leading to fears of more state-sanctioned restrictions on platforms such as YouTube²⁰. This restrictive regulatory environment leads to the proliferation of misinformation against their community that goes unchecked or over-censored.

Lack of representation

Religious minorities are not represented in the media²¹ and online platforms, which can lead to a lack of understanding and acceptance of their beliefs and practices. This often means misinformation feeds into pre-existing biases and stereotypes against the community, making counter-information less effective.

Some of the incidents of hate speech and mis/disinformation narrated by the participants during the consultation process are as follows:

Incident 1: #MandirTauBanega

In 2020, the Capital Development Authority (CDA) in Islamabad granted permission for the construction of a boundary wall at the site of a Hindu Temple, community center and cremation ground²². This decision received a massive backlash on social media, particularly on Twitter, which included offensive photo and video content, as well as creating a propaganda song to protest the construction of the Hindu temple²³.

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19. US, S. D. (2020). 2020 report on International Religious Freedom - United States. State Gov. Retrieved January 25, 2023, from <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/>
20. Geo Fact Check. (2022, December). Fact-check: Google has registered in Pakistan under controversial 2021 Social Media Rules. Geo.tv: Latest News Breaking Pakistan, World, Live Videos. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.geo.tv/latest/459958-fact-check-google-has-registered-in-pakistan-under-controversial-2021-social-media-rules>
21. Rehmat, A. (2019, July 9). Religious minorities overlooked in Pakistan's mainstream media. IMS. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.mediasupport.org/religions-minorities-overlooked-in-pakistans-mainstream-media>
22. Reporter, T. N. S. (2020, July 11). Pakistan Ulema Council announces support for construction of temple. DAWN.COM. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from https://www.dawn.com/news/amp/1568209?__twitter_impresion=true
23. Veengas [@Veengas]. (2020, July 12) What kind of message is given to Non-Muslims in Pakistan? Will Imran Khan take notice of it? Read our report on Temple: Malhi, argue that since state contributed funds for Kartarpur Corridor which allows Sikhs [#MandirTauBanega](https://thewire.in/religion/islamabad-temple-high-court-imran-khan) [Tweet]. Twitter. https://twitter.com/Veengas/status/1282169071371517954?s=20&t=7fVne1Uz_Ou94Vkh51OsmA

To counteract this, the hashtag #MandirTauBanega was created, and many people from different communities expressed their support. However, despite the popularity of the counter-campaign, the CDA canceled the land allocation in 2021²⁴ and the site was already desecrated prior to the campaign online.²⁵

Incident 2: Shia Discrimination

A participant from the Shia community in Peshawar described an incident in which she posted about the practise of 'matam'²⁶ during Muharram on her Whatsapp status. In response to the status, one of her own contact list members proceeded to call her a Kafir²⁷ (for posting such material). The Shia participant shared that the incident had a chilling effect and has since avoided posting about her religious identity.

Incident 3: Custodial Torture of Christian Community

Another participant referred to an event in which a Christian man accused of blasphemy in Lahore jumped off the fourth floor of the cyber crime wing, Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) building during investigation/interrogation²⁸. The incident, reported widely in the media, occurred according to the accused because of custodial torture by the FIA personnel. This included sexual torture, he alleged that the FIA coerced him and his cousin to engage in sexual acts while in custody. Despite the brutality of this incident, there has been little shift in the public's sentiment regarding such police actions, perhaps given that laws used in such cases are strict liability offenses and mere debate can be construed as the commission of offense itself.²⁹

24. Bashir, S. (2021, November 8). CDA cancels land allocation for Hindu Temple. The Express Tribune. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2328399/cda-cancels-land-allocation-for-hindu-temple>

25. Veengas. (2020, July 11). Should an Islamic State Fund a Mandir? as Pak debates, Hindus pray for temple in Islamabad. The Wire. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://thewire.in/religion/islamabad-temple-high-court-imran-khan>

26. The Arabic term matam refers in general to an act or gesture of mourning; in Shia Islam the term designates acts of lamentation for the martyrs of Karbala.

27. Kafir is an Arabic and Islamic term which, in the Islamic tradition, refers to a person who disbelieves in God as per Islam, or denies his authority, or rejects the tenets of Islam. The term is often translated as "infidel", "pagan", "rejector", "denier", "disbeliever", "unbeliever", "nonbeliever", and "non-Muslim".

28. Gul, A. (2018, February 26). Christian blasphemy suspect in Pakistan jumps from building. VOA. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.voanews.com/a/christian-blasphemy-suspect-in-pakistan-jumps-from-building-to-escape-torture/4270915.html>

29. Khan, Z. (2011, February 2). Blasphemy law amendment: Sherry Rehman to withdraw bill, says PM. The Express Tribune. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/113445/blasphemy-law-amendment-sherry-rehman-to-withdraw-bill-says-pm>

During an interview with a Center for Social Justice (CSJ) representative, he described the events surrounding the execution of two Christian brothers, which he witnessed. Rashid Emmanuel, a pastor, and Sajid Masih Emmanuel were shot dead outside the Faisalabad courts in 2010³⁰ right before they were set to be acquitted of blasphemy charges due to a lack of corroborating evidence. These deaths sparked tensions between the Muslim and Christian communities in the area, which were inflamed by deceptive social media posts, and a state of emergency was declared in Faisalabad in anticipation of unrest. According to (CSJ), even more than a decade later, many inside and outside the community are either unwilling or terrified to associate with Rashid and Sajid's family as many members of religious minority communities believe that mere mention of such allegations might put entire families and communities at risk, especially when the state refuses to provide protection or support those accused. This also speaks to the intergenerational impact of such threats.

Issues raised during the consultations and interviews can be divided into the following themes:

- Lack of trust in the state machinery and judicial system
- Fear of retaliation for expressing opinions/celebrating religious festivals
- Self-censorship to avoid allegations

30. Khan, F. (2010, July 20). Faisalabad, murdered brothers buried. justice and peace: Abolish the blasphemy law now. PIME Asia News. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Faisalabad,-murdered-brothers-buried.-Justice-and-Peace:-abolish-the-blasphemy-law-now--18982.html>

EXISTING PROTECTIONS AND LAWS

The Constitution of Pakistan provides certain rights and protections to citizens, including freedom of speech and expression. However, it is important to note that these rights are not absolute and may be subject to restrictions.

In recent years, Pakistan has implemented a number of laws and regulations aimed at protecting citizens online. For example, the PECA 2016 was enacted to combat cybercrime and protect citizens from online harassment and hate speech. However, the law has been criticized by civil society and rights groups for its potential to restrict freedom of expression.

Digital Rights in the Constitution

The following fundamental rights provided in the constitution provide the basis for many digital rights in Pakistan.

Article 19: Freedom of Expression

Article 19A: Right and access to Information

Article 14: The dignity of man and, subject to law, the privacy of home, shall be inviolable

Article 17: Freedom of association and assembly

Article 25: Equality of citizens, "All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law."

Digital Rights under Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA)

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 in Pakistan aims to regulate cybercrime and protect personal information and data stored on electronic devices. It criminalizes activities such as hacking, cyberstalking, identity theft, and spreading false information. The act also establishes a framework for collecting electronic evidence and empowers law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute electronic crimes.

Some notable sections are as follows:

- Section 10. Cyber terrorism
- Section 11. Hate speech
- Section 20. Offenses against dignity of natural person
- Section 21. Offenses against modesty of a natural person and minor
- Section 22. Child pornography
- Section 24. Cyberstalking
- Pakistan Penal Code, 1860 (Act XLV of 1860) to apply - The provisions of the Pakistan Penal Code, 1860 (Act XLV of 1860), to the extent not inconsistent with anything provided in this Act shall apply to the offenses provided in this Act.

Laws for Reporting Misinformation or Disinformation

Several laws in Pakistan could deal with fake news and misinformation, but implementation of these laws is at best abysmal in the case of religious minorities. It is also important to note that laws governing fake news frequently violate the right to free expression or access to information, and can be used to target marginalized communities such as religious minorities.

Section 29, Telegraph Act 1885:

Prohibits a person from transmitting any message through a telegraph which he knows or has reason to believe to be 'false'.

Section 31, Pakistan Telecommunication (Re-organisation) Act, 1996:

Penalizes anyone transmitting through a telecommunication system/service any speech, sound, data, writing, image or video that s/he knows or has reasons to believe to be false.

Section 3, Defamation Ordinance 2002:

Any wrongful act or publication or circulation of a false statement or representation made orally or in written or visual form which injures the reputation of a person, tends to lower him in the estimation of others or tends to reduce him to ridicule, unjust criticism, dislike, contempt or hatred shall be actionable as defamation.

Section 20, Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA):

Any intentional transmission or exhibition of any information through any information system that is false and intimidates or harms the reputation or privacy of a natural person³¹

31. Parts of section 20 relating to reputational harm have been struck down by the Islamabad High Court in April 2022, however there is conflicting jurisprudence from the Lahore High Court from the same year that upholds the section as constitutional.

Section 499, Pakistan Penal Code (PPC):

Any words either spoken or intended to be read, or signs or visible representations that harm the reputation of a person.

Section 37, PECA:

Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA) has the power to issue directions for removal or blocking of access to any Intelligence through any Information system, if it considers it necessary in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defense of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign states, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, commission of or incitement to an offense.

Rule 3, Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards), Rules 2021:³²

Enhances the power of the PTA to remove and block any content that contains any fake or false information that threatens the public order, public health, and public safety.

32. Currently under challenge at the Islamabad High Court.

The Supreme Court in the *Tassaduq Jilani judgment* of 2014³³ paragraph 37(iii) states: 'the Federal Government should take appropriate steps to ensure that hate speeches in social media are discouraged and the delinquents are brought to justice under the law;'. In 2018, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) petitioned the Supreme Court of Pakistan, which resulted in establishing a commission tasked with ensuring the implementation of the 2014 supreme court ruling, including paragraph 37 (iii).

More often than not, religious minorities in Pakistan use these laws and protections to fight cases of allegations against themselves. In August 2022, during the post-arrest bail request hearing of Salamat Mansha Masih, the apex court observed that the State should take extraordinary caution and care when dealing with blasphemy cases, as well as provide the accused with total protection until the allegations are proven to embody the spirit of Article 25 of the Constitution³⁴. There are very few cases where religious minorities filed a case on their own that resulted in fruitful results, such as the vandalism of Shri Mari Maata Mandir in Korangi, Karachi, where a case was filed against the culprits but nothing came of it³⁵.

These are just a few examples, but it is important to note that religious minorities continue to face difficulties in accessing justice and having their cases effectively addressed in Pakistan. In general, laws and regulations protecting citizens online in Pakistan are still in their infancy and face implementation and effectiveness challenges³⁶.

33. Suo Motu No.1/2014 (PLD 2014 SC 699) - <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/559e57644.pdf>

34. Ahmed, A. (2022, December 31). Religious minorities in Pakistan: A chequered year. The Express Tribune. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2393613/religious-minorities-in-pakistan-a-chequered-year>

35. Mandhro, S. (2022, June 8). Hindu temple vandalised in Karachi. The Express Tribune. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2360662/hindu-temple-vandalised-in-karachi>

36. Hassan, M. (2021, October 1). Progress needed urgently on Tassaduq Jilani Judgement. HRCP. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/progress-needed-urgently-on-tassaduq-jilani-judgement/>.

RECOMMENDATIONS

State:

- Establishment of an inclusive and independent commission to safeguard interests of religious minorities, or strengthening of existing human rights commissions such as the National Commission of Human Rights to proactively monitor, investigate, and bring to light violations of the rights of religious minorities in both online and offline spaces. Such a body should not exclude religious minorities as has been the experience with previous commissions³⁷.
- FIA and other Law Enforcement Agencies (LEAs) should be made to handle cases with religious minorities through training and establishment of a hate suppression cell to deal with online hate and disinformation campaigns. Dedicated officers should be assigned and provided resources to investigate such incidents. Safeguards should be in place to ensure that such mechanisms are not weaponized against minority groups.
- An oversight committee should be established (composed of civil society, digital rights experts and religious minority representatives) that can monitor and ensure accountability for the cases brought before LEAs. This committee can work in tandem with independent commissions for human and religious minority rights and encompass within its oversight actions by state bodies and officials.
- The writ of state should be unbiased and unbending in the face of pressure from political and religious groups to ensure enforcement of rule of law to protect religious minorities. The state should proactively penalize false accusations against religious minorities as per the *Asia Bibi v. State* Supreme Court judgment of 2018³⁸. These measures should also be designed in a way to ensure they are not used against religious minorities, e.g the controversial hate speech laws enacted in Pakistan³⁹.

37. HRW. (2020, October 28). Pakistan: Ahmadis kept off Minorities Commission. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved January 31, 2023, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/08/pakistan-ahmadis-kept-minorities-commission>

38. Criminal Appeal No.39-L of 2015 (PLD 2019 SC 64) https://www.supremecourt.gov.pk/downloads_judgments/Crl.A._39_L_2015.pdf.

39. Study Group, A. P. (2022, April 4). Preventing hate speech, incitement and discrimination: The case of Pakistan. GAAMAC. Retrieved January 26, 2023, from <https://gaamac.org/2022/04/preventing-hate-speech-incitement-and-discrimination-the-case-of-pakistan/>

- The availability and effectiveness of reporting bodies such as FIA, PTA, and LEAs should be improved - including accessible reporting mechanisms such as online reporting. For example, necessary amendments should be made to existing laws to ensure that verification of an online complaint for online content should not warrant a physical visit to the complaining body's office, the cyber crime wing of FIA is currently only located in 15 urban centers.
- The state should set up programs to educate the public about how to critically evaluate online content which can help them to identify and avoid false information. This includes reevaluating the curriculum to include basic media literacy and removing content that perpetuates religious stereotypes and hateful attitudes among young children.

Social Media Platforms:

- Social media platforms should employ local language content moderation to thoroughly investigate hate speech and manage timely removal of such content.
- Social media companies should alter their algorithms to prioritize accurate information, demote misleading content, and adopt tools such as interstitials and disclaimers to identify misleading information. Furthermore, algorithmic transparency should be practiced to empower users to understand why misinformation gains traction.
- There should be a greater role of local civil society and religious minorities in the developing policies of social media companies. Religious minority leaders and activists should be appointed as community monitors who can escalate the resolution of time-sensitive issues and provide context for misinformation and hate speech. Furthermore, input from minority communities should be ensured at the design stage of products and policies, including impact assessment on various communities within each country/region.

Civil Society:

- Civil society and human rights groups should advocate for and work towards mass awareness campaigns that are targeted towards religious minorities and the rights they are afforded by the constitution and other laws online and offline.
- NGOs and civil society actors can build fact-checking abilities en masse and particularly for religious minority communities to create counter-narratives to online misinformation/disinformation.
- Proactive support from civil society organizations and groups should be extended when cases of hate speech and disinformation targeting religious minorities emerge. Support can include public statements of solidarity, extending resources for investigation/fact-finding and community-driven interventions developed in consultation with the impacted community.

Policy Makers:

- Campaigns should be set up to create greater awareness among policy-makers regarding technology-related issues to ensure the formation of human rights-centric policies for issues such as online safety, hate speech and misinformation.
- All political parties should include in their manifesto rights and safety of religious minorities, especially regarding the role of misinformation during election time.
- Political parties should also take proactive steps to ensure religious harmony such as: adopting a zero-tolerance policy towards hate speech and discrimination based on religion, educating party members and supporters on the importance of religious tolerance and diversity, supporting legislation and policies aimed at protecting the rights of religious minorities, condemning violence and discrimination against religious minorities and taking action against those who perpetrate such acts, encouraging diversity and representation of religious minorities within the party and in government positions, and providing a platform for religious minorities to voice their concerns and to participate in the political process.

Media:

- Media should play a role in reducing online misinformation by promoting accurate, fact-based and investigative reporting. They should also correct false information impacting religious minorities through proactive fact checks and by providing context and background information on sensitive issues.
- Media organizations, both traditional media and digital, should take steps to ensure the inclusion of religious minorities by diversifying their staff to include representation from minorities, covering issues faced by minority communities and including sources and voices from religious minorities in their work. The media should highlight stories and perspectives of religious minorities to help promote empathy and understanding among the general population.
- Media outlets should be more mindful of their own role in amplifying misinformation by developing robust and transparent ethical practices to avoid spreading false information themselves.

Community:

- Dialogue should be initiated with all the religions' representatives to promote interfaith harmony and de-escalate dangerous situations, e.g. false allegations and viral hate speech campaigns.

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