



# Save Pakistan's Stolen Girls: Child Trafficking in Pakistan

## Policy Brief

The systematic abductions and forced conversions of young Hindu, Christian, and Sikh girls haunt minority communities in Pakistan on a daily basis. According to the Movement for Solidarity and Peace (MSP) of Pakistan, more than [1,000 Hindu and Christian girls](#) across the country are stolen from their families annually. This means that from 2011-2021, 10,000 girls were abducted.

## Background

The commonplace violence against abducted Hindu and Christian girls and women is typically at least fivefold and includes:

1. [Abduction](#) from homes or public spaces;
2. [Forced conversion](#) certified from a Mosque;
3. [Forced marriage](#) usually sanctioned by a judge;
4. [Rape](#); and
5. **Forced separation from family either while held captive by their abductors or while held in shelter homes by the state while their legal case is in process.**

This child trafficking is made possible because once abducted, forcefully converted, and forced to marry, the girls are taken to a local court by their abductors, where a judge usually sanctions the legality of the marriage and conversion, legitimizing their abduction.

The nature of the violence in these incidents is intersectional and simultaneously involves violence against women, violence against children, and violence against minority communities. The intentional description of this violence as voluntary conversion by the clerics, judges, and government officials misidentifies this violence as a mental process of choosing religious belief, rather than the physical traumas of abduction, forced marriage, rape, death threats, forced isolation, and being kept from one's family, amongst others.



## Intersectional Violence in Pakistan

The intersectional violence that girls and women from religious minorities face in low and middle-income countries has continued with impunity because it has not been part of broader global advocacy efforts to combat gender based violence. Pakistan, as a lower middle income country, receives a tremendous amount of international aid targeted at supporting both economic and social development. Yet, the government of Pakistan has failed to take any meaningful steps to protect minority girls from systematic abductions, forced marriages, and sexual violences.

The violence against women and children in Pakistan is pervasive and intersectional. Violence against children and violence against women— including rape and abduction— are both on the rise in Pakistan. The sustained discrimination and persecution of religious minorities in Pakistan, such as Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, and Ahmadiyya Muslims includes, but is not limited to, murder, torture, forced abductions, sexual violence, and looting/arson of their homes. Women and girls from minority communities thus experience this compounding violence differently and more acutely.

There has been little consideration from international advocacy efforts on the intersectionality of religious minority girls and women. Countries such as Pakistan are able to support and/or allow violence against women and children from religious minority communities without consequence precisely because these forms of gender and sexual violence are not part of the gender based violence cannon. To close the impunity gap for the gross human rights violations against Hindu, Sikh, and Christian girls and women in Pakistan, human rights advocates must research, document, and collect evidence of this persistent violence in order to raise awareness with the international community.

## Child Trafficking in Pakistan

These pervasive and persistent instances of child trafficking are made possible by the mislabeling of this issue as an issue of voluntary conversion, and therefore an issue of freedom of belief. Pakistan is [party](#) to the [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) which states that “No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.” Despite being a signatory to this important provision, Pakistan has sustained a “conversion factory” with [well documented](#) instances of forced conversion of minor girls from minority communities.

Clerics who wish to abduct girls do so under Sharia law, which they interpret to mean that any girl who has reached puberty is of marriageable age. By abducting and then immediately converting these girls, they become eligible for marriage in the eyes of the Pakistan government. Girls sometimes [as young as 12](#) are taken from their families and never allowed to see their families again because of the illegitimate concern that they will be converted back to Hinduism or Christianity per their family’s belief. Conversion or belief is of course irrelevant when it comes to the welfare of a child.



Per the 1989 [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#), parents have the right to care for their children, and children have the right to be cared for by their parents and families. Abducting and forcibly keeping children while the families beg for their children back is child trafficking, regardless of whether the added violence of forced conversion and forced marriage are present factors.

## Recommendations

To address this significant systemic and physical violence, the overlooked realities of intersectional child trafficking must be taken seriously by the international community. The issue of forced conversion is an added dimension and further compounds the violence that abducted minority girls and women face. The violence that must be addressed in Pakistan is three-fold:

1. **Violence against women and children**
2. **Violence against minorities**
3. **Violence against minority women and children**

The Pakistan government's acceptance of their interpretation of Sharia law, unwillingness to prosecute perpetrators, and participation in keeping children separated from their families suggest that not only are the federal and local governments in Pakistan aware of these issues, but they are complicit in them.

Accordingly, the international community must take the following immediate steps to put pressure on the Pakistan government to protect women and girls from minority communities in Pakistan:

1. **Do not recommend Pakistan to the UN Human Rights Council.** Pakistan is a willing participant in systematically violating the human rights violations of women, children, and minorities within its borders. Citizens should encourage their respective governments not to reelect Pakistan to the Human Rights Council.
2. **Impose economic sanctions against Pakistan.** Citizens should petition their respective governments to impose sanctions on Pakistan until and unless the child trafficking in Pakistan ends and the perpetrators are brought to justice. The United States should impose targeted sanctions on Pakistan and Pakistani officials under the International Religious Freedom Act as a Country of Particular Concern.
3. **Curb military and civilian assistance to Pakistan.** Citizens should ask their respective governments to stop spending their tax dollars in supporting governments such as Pakistan which do not protect its citizens. Instead, aid should be allocated to non-profit and community organizations on the ground which serve disenfranchised minorities.