

Ayra Indrias Patras*

Intersectional Challenges faced by Christian Women in Interfaith Marriages

Abstract

Often religious minority communities in Pakistan complain about their daughters being abducted and forced to marry Muslims and convert to Islam. These cases are reported and charges are filed against the perpetrators for abduction and unlawful conversion. However, when asked about their experiences in Court, many of the girls and women say the marriage and conversion took place with their consent and free will, and the charges have to be dropped. The study explores these interfaith marriages and examines the socio-religious challenges experienced by Christian girls and women, who converted to Islam and married Muslim men.

Interfaith marriages are widely believed to bring together people of different faiths and promote diversity and inclusiveness. Verma and Sukhramani argued that interfaith marriages are actually a scale of social distance and a prism to comprehend relationships among different religious groups or communities¹.

Adhering to the feminist position of a woman's independent right to choose a partner in a marriage, the study argues that the interplay of religious patriarchies and cultural conditioning are played out on women bodies both from majority and minority communities eclipsing women's right to choice for marriage. The study contributes in giving visibility to the agency/voices of women, who navigate through uneven socio-religious terrain for the pursuit of happiness in their marital alliances. The findings of the study also drew attention to the socio-religious prejudices, stereotypes, identity crisis, stigmas and class divisions jeopardizing the lives of women on multiple counts.

The study has employed in-depth interviews as a research tool drawing insights from the qualitative research method. Exploring the lived realities of 6 Christian women, who have contracted marriages with Muslim men, the present study dwells upon a few questions, such as, why are interfaith marriages resented by the minority community? Do Christian women converting to Islam and contracting marriages with Muslims face socio-religious challenges in their newly adopted faith and married life and what are they? Does their Christian identity have any implications on their conversion?

The study draws on the lived experiences of six Christian women in Lahore, married to Muslim men for more than ten years. It also examines how interfaith marriages are perceived by the Christian community. Two male Christian clergy

* Dr. Ayra Indrias Patras*, Assistant Professor Forman Christian College Lahore Pakistan

¹ Shweta Verma & Neelam Sukhramani, "Interfaith Marriages and Negotiated Spaces," *Society and Culture in South Asia* 4, no.1 (2017):25.

and two lawyers who have offered legal assistance to family members of Christian women, who have contracted marriages with Muslims were interviewed. The study dwells upon six thematic areas including interfaith relations, religious conversion, caste prejudices, gender discrimination, and communal conflicts.

Christians as Religious Minority

Christians in Pakistan are living at the fringes of society negotiating with challenges stemming from poor class, despicable Chura caste, subservient gender and association with a minority religious community. An overwhelming number of Christians are employed as sweepers in janitorial service sector across Pakistan, a profession socially looked down upon, carrying a historical baggage of social prejudice and discrimination ascribed to this unclean and dirty work².

Although among many other scholars, Charles Amjad Ali³ and Shaun Gregory⁴ have dwelt upon the status of Non-Muslims in Pakistan from the perspectives of human rights, but not enough attention is accorded to explore the lived experiences of women of religious minority community in Pakistan from the lens interfaith relations. Academic literature in Pakistan has not probed into the multiple marginality stemming from the intersectional social divisions based on gender, religion, class and caste.

One NGO report informs that thousands of Christian and Hindu women between the age of 12 -25 are forced to convert their religion and marry Muslim men and the same report says that when parents file the case of abduction against Muslim husbands, these girls make pronouncement in the court of law that they married by their choice⁵. After having witnessed several cases of such nature, a Christian lawyer commented,

Parents of the Christian community often believes that their daughters are forcibly abducted, coerced into religious conversion to Islam and married to Muslim men. They instantly file legal cases of abduction and under age marriages against the man with whom their daughter has eloped. However, in the court of law, girls after their religious conversion and marriage to a Muslim man record statement categorically emphasizing their free will to religious conversion and marriage without any coercion. In such cases, claims of parents fall apart and girls are legally allowed to walk away with their husband.

Referring to international human rights treaties such as Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights 1996, European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms 1950, African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1981), Universal Islamic Declaration on Human Rights (1981), the Lahore High Court Judgement

² Asif Aqeel and Ayra Indrias Patras, " Punjabi Christians' Disconnect and Denial of their History," in *International Conference on The Punjab History and Culture 6-8 January*, eds. Sajid Mahmood Awan and Rahat Zubair Malik (Lahore, Centre of Excellence, Quaid-e-Azam University Islamabad, 2020), 591.

³ Charles Amjad-Ali, " Constitutional Rights for Minorities and Women in Pakistan," *Al-Mushir The Counselor* (1991): 151-121.

⁴ Shaun Gregory, "Under the shadow of Islam: the plight of the Christian minority in Pakistan," *Contemporary South Asia*, 20:2 (2012):195-212.

⁵ Anwar Iqbal, "1,000 minority girls forced in marriage every year," *Dawn*, April 08, 2014, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1098452> (accessed July 19, 2009).

emphasized that the right to profess, practice and propagate religion is a fundamental human right that also includes freedom of choosing one's religion. In this case, the court heard a petition filed by the parents of 14 years aged girl Pummy Muskan's praying that her religious conversion be declared void in view of her legal disability. The court upheld that this could not be done because the concepts of valid, void and voidable cannot be applied to religious right and the resulting personal law unless the latter itself ordains or the statutory law sanctions them. Pakistan does not have anti-conversion laws. In Sindh Province, two attempts to pass an anti-conversion bill in 2016 and 2019 were made, but due to fierce opposition from the Islamist groups and parties, the bills were not passed⁶.

Lurking Shadows of Low Caste

Surinder S Jodhka and Ghanshyam Shah explained that caste based discrimination in South Asia reflects in various forms such as economic poverty, social marginalization and a life of humiliation experienced by various groups in Pakistan, who are viewed as untouchable or polluting⁷. They highlighted that the term scheduled caste is often used for untouchables in Pakistan, which includes small Hindu minorities and Punjabi Christians, who were converted from the Dalit Chura caste of Punjab. Public discourse on the question caste prejudices is silent in Pakistan, whereas, Harris Guzdar argued that the exclusionary practices revolving around social taboos against marginalized groups such as Christians, Kolhis, Bheels, Lachhis, Bagris and other scheduled castes are widely prevalent regulating eating, drinking and sharing meals⁸. Explaining the implications of the caste based discrimination in Pakistan, Asif Aqeel argued that majority of Christians in Punjab are untouchables and involved in labour socially viewed as degrading and defiling that include collecting carcasses, manually removing human waste from toilets, engaging in cheap labour in fields and executing criminals in jails⁹.

Gendered Dimension of Interfaith Marriages

For a Muslim man to marry a Christian woman, is less problematic than a Muslim woman marries a Christian man¹⁰. Islamic religious sources and authoritative laws and rulings concerning intermarriage reflect a sympathetic tone towards individuals classified as Ahl al - kitab but the definition of Ahl al-kitab itself is subjective entailing justifications for prohibiting intermarriage between Muslim

⁶ *Library of Congress*. <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2019-11-15/pakistan-sindh-province-rejects-bill-against-forced-conversions/> (accessed July 18, 2021).

⁷ Surinder S Jodhka and Ghanshyam, "Comparative Context of Discrimination Caste and Untouchability in South Asia," *Economic and Political Weekly Vol 45, No 48*, November 27-December 3, 2012: 99.

⁸ Harris Guzdar, "Class, Caste or Race: Veils over Social Oppression in Pakistan," *Economic and Political Weekly*, January 13, 2007: 87.

⁹ Asif Aqeel, "Christians Required Only as Sweepers," *The Friday Times*, October 23, 2015, <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/christians-required-only-as-sweepers/#:~:text=On%20September%2028%2C%20the%20Punjab,eligible%20for%20sanitation%2Drelated%20jobs.&text=Christians%20make%20up%20most%20of,cent%20of%20the%20total%20population> (accessed, July 21, 2021).

¹⁰ Jana Van Niekerk & Maykel Verkuyten, "Interfaith marriages attitudes in Muslim majority countries: A multiple approach," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 28, no.4 (2018): 258.

women and non-Muslim men¹¹. The socio-religious space is not conducive for such couples to live their lives peacefully as evident in a case, when a Muslim woman married a Christian man, they both went into hiding for several months because the couple was shunned away from the community and endured death threats and abduction¹².

A Christian lawyer shared the similar observation,

If the marriage takes place between Christian man and a Muslim woman, then life of the couple is extremely difficult. They run away and go into hiding to avoid the anger and violence of their community. Contrary to it, if a Christian woman marries a Muslim, at first, she has to relinquish her Christian faith to be socially acceptable in the Muslim family of her husband but in several cases of this nature, women even after converting to Islam are not respected by their Muslim in-laws.

Analysing inter-religious marriages in India, K.P Pothen identified the factors including love, neighbourhood friendship, lack of proper mates in one's community, parental laxity, poverty and co-education are responsible for such marriages, however social stigma and resistance for such marriages are found in a traditional society¹³. Analyzing religious conversions conditioned by social and legal realities in inter-religious couples, Daphna Hacker pointed out the gendered dimensions of socio-legal anxieties in inter-religious marriages that placed more pressure on women to convert than on men¹⁴. Women face more resistance in interfaith and intercommunity marriages as compared to men, similarly, women rather than men have to renegotiate the boundaries and make adjustments and compromises to seek accepted behaviours by changing names, dress and behaviour¹⁵.

Giving a new Muslim name to Christian woman at the time of her religious conversion and marriage to Muslim man is a common practice. While negotiating with her new name and identity distances these women from their previous community, it does not diminish her desire to keep a connection with it. In the words of a woman, 'although I am Muslim with a new name but I do not want to cut off my relations with my parents and Christian relatives'.

Resentment of Minority Community for interfaith Marriages

Minorities' communities do not support interfaith marriages rather they resent such marital knots. Wayne McClintock noted that Pakistani Christians are very aware of their distinctive religious identity, since childhood, children are socially oriented by their parents about their exclusive religious identity and if any member

¹¹ Nida Ali, "Muslims in Interfaith Marriages in the West: Gender, Globalization, and Pluralism" (Master thesis, McMaster University (Religious Studies) Hamilton, Ontario, 2017), 39.

¹² The Nation, "Pakistan's interfaith couples stay in trouble," *The Nation*, August 14, 2014, <https://nation.com.pk/17-Aug-2014/pakistan-s-interfaith-couples-stay-in-trouble> (accessed July 19, 2021).

¹³ K.P Pothen, "INTER-RELIGIOUS MARRIAGES IN CENTRAL INDIA (MALWA), *International Journal of Sociology of the Family*, 4, no.2 (1974):193

¹⁴ Daphna Hacker, "Inter-Religious Marriages in Israel: Gendered Implications for Conversion, Children, and Citizenship," *Israel Studies* 14, no.2 (2009):181

¹⁵ Shweta Verma & Neelam Sukhrmani, "Interfaith Marriages and Negotiated Spaces," 8.

of their community repudiates his/her faith, then, that person is socially despicable and abandoned by the community¹⁶.

Parents see their daughter's interfaith marriage as equivalent to inviting dishonour on their family in particular and bad reputation to their community in general¹⁷. Religious patriarchs of minority communities discourage interfaith liaisons. Responding to the question as to how Church Leadership view interfaith marriages, a Priest said,

We cannot allow our daughters to marry Muslim men. When Christian girls marry Muslims, they invite bad name and shame to our social status and we boycott such women and their families. These marriages do not stay for a long time. I have seen a few girls returning to their parents after such broken marriages. In some cases, parents do not accept their daughters back, women are left with no choice except to live with their abusive husbands and suffer problems there for life.

This kind of social hostility between minority and majority communities further reinforces polarization of religious identities and narrows the social space for practicing interfaith harmony and social cohesion.

Intracommunity Patriarchal Restrictions

While narrating an ordeal of being subjected to domestic violence by her maternal family after expressing the choice of marrying a Muslim man, Rubina shared her experience.

I knew that marrying a person of my choice from a Muslim faith would cause a lot of anger and disappointment among my relatives. I survived even a well-planned killing plot from my maternal relatives because my grandmother was hell bent upon killing me when she came to know that I would marry a Muslim man. I was invited by mother grandmother for a night's stay and my maternal uncles were also there. My maternal uncle had beaten me so badly and I was quite sure that they would kill me. I started screaming loud and neighbors came in and rescued me. That day, I decided that I would marry quickly, and I ran away to seek refuge in my Uncle's home, who was sympathetic towards me. Once I asked me relatives to find a Christian man for me to marry but they did not listen to me rather threatened me with dire consequences if I marry a Muslim man. For them, marrying a Muslim man means that I am betraying my faith but I have not rather I grew stronger in my faith but I still fail to make my relatives understand.

Gender is controlled to articulate the cultural identity where women are considered as privileged bearers of corporate identities and boundary markers of their communities that eclipse women's full-fledged status as equal citizens of a modern nation-state¹⁸. In feminist studies, the woman body has been central to a wide range of debates, including: men's control of women's bodies as a key means of

¹⁶ Wayne McClintock, "A Sociological Profile of the Christian Minority," *Missiology: An International Review* 20, no.3 (1992):345.

¹⁷ Ayra Indrias Patras, "Intersectional Challenges to Women of Religious Minorities: (A Case of Minority Women in Pakistan)," in *Proceedings of International Conference on Human Rights: Challenges and Prospects 2018*, eds. Khalid Manzoor Butt Muhammad Manzoor Elahi (Lahore: Government College University Lahore, October 2018), 150.

¹⁸ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 20, no.3 (1991): 435.

subordination¹⁹. It equates with the liberal feminist analysis espousing women bodies as embodiment of carrying male, family and community honor. The onus of collective community's honour impedes woman's agency in marrying a person of her own choice. Woman's independent right to personal choice is contingent upon family and community's approval.

Analyzing the religious conversion of Dalit women, Charu Gupta describes tension between community rights that were given visibility and social status and individual choices, which were silenced and marginalized²⁰. In the same vein, Gupta argued that Dalit women's religious conversion to Islam caused disquiet among the reformers of the community and Dalit men because these women were seen bringing shame to the community, therefore, it appears as a political and social consensus between them against the desire of Dalit women to convert as individuals, without familial and community approval²¹.

Fearing religious conversion, Sikh minority Community in Lahore do not allow their daughters to acquire education and access public spaces because community elders/patriarchs think that their daughters would be exposed to interfaith interactions and they would become vulnerable to religious conversions through marriages by men of the Muslim community, therefore, Sikh girls are usually married off at an early age within their own community²². The fear of cultural integration is also seen in the work of Rubina Saigol, who indicated the patriarchal driven nationalist anxiety in the work of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, a leading Muslim scholar of the late 19th century, who restricted Muslim women acquiring modern education in public sphere due to the fear of loss of control over them²³.

Despite the restrictive and oppressive conditions, women who choose their marriage partners know that their choices would place them at considerable risks. However they do this, knowing they are contesting control of their sexuality and morality and also rejecting claims of their families, who try to control them²⁴. Women are not seen as an independent individual with free will, but rather as carrying the honour of their families and communities, and consequently, abductions and conversions are weaponized to humiliate and hurt communities²⁵. The psycho-social construction of sexuality in an oppressed class and downtrodden community emanates from the unreconstructed patriarchies

¹⁹ Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2004), 6.

²⁰ Charu Gupta, "Intimate Desires: Dalit Women and Religious Conversions in Colonial India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 3 (2014): 663.

²¹ Gupta, "Intimate Desires: Dalit Women and Religious Conversions in Colonial India," 74.

²² Ayra Indrias Patras, "Intersectional Challenges to Women of Religious Minorities: (A Case of Minority Women in Pakistan), 150.

²³ Rubina Saigol, *The Pakistan Project A Feminist Perspective on Nation and Identity* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2013), 52, 56.

²⁴ Shahnaz Khan, "Zina and the moral regulation of Pakistani women," *Feminist Review*, no. 75 (2003): 92.

²⁵ Hiba Akbar, "The forgotten chapters of 1947," *The Nation*, August 15, 2020, <https://nation.com.pk/16-Aug-2020/the-forgotten-chapters-of-1947> (accessed July 19, 2021).

sanctioning power, purity and superiority to maleness and associating impurity, inferiority, weakness to female²⁶.

Social Ostracism from Parental Home

After spending ten years with a Muslim husband, Ayesha at the time of her marriage after her conversion to Islam, blamed her poverty, parentless life, patriarchal restriction and domestic violence by her brothers that caused her to marry outside her Christian faith. She described,

I had to convert to Islam to marry a Muslim man because my husband told me there is no other option and I have to leave my previous religion and then I would be accepted by his family. Although I like my husband's family but I sometimes feel that I should not have taken this decision of marrying a Muslim man, because after marriage my brothers and sisters and relatives abandoned me. We should not leave our religion. I think I have done a mistake. I did it because my mother has left us when I was 3 years old after marrying another man. My father had passed away too. Had my parents lived with me, they could have stopped me. My brother was very violent with me. I thought that marriage would provide me financial and emotional support. I always advice my young girls not to marry outside their faith and rather respect their parents' choice because if a girl marries within her faith and respects her parents' choice in selecting a marriage partner at least she can revert to her parents in times of crisis and challenges. In my case, I am not allowed by my in-laws to meet my Christian relatives.

Societal disapproval against Christian women for marrying outside their religion leave far-fetched imprints on the lives of these women, who have to forgo their familial relations with Christians. Rubina lamented,

Although I stood firm with my decision of marrying a Muslim man of my choice, but sometimes, I think that I have made a wrong decision because I cannot meet my sisters and brother and I miss them a lot as I am aging.”

Mehwish also explained her grief of being socially distanced from her Christian relatives.

My relatives do not invite me to their places, I cannot attend weddings and birthdays and other family functions of my cousins as they think I have committed a grave sin by marrying a Muslim man.

Living with the feeling of guilt stems from the wounded experiences of these women, as expressed by another woman.

I know I have made a mistake of marrying a Muslim man because I am disliked by my Christian community. They thought as I have become a pariah by marrying outside my faith. I also experience discriminatory and derogatory behaviour from Muslim relatives of my husband, who think that Christian people are inferior and unclean. Being constantly subjected to such experiences, I never advise any Christian woman to marry a Muslim because she will never be accepted by Muslims and her own Christian community hates her too.

The story of Sangeeta, named Zakiya after her conversion when she was 6 years old, highlights the challenges of religious conversion from minority to a majority faith.

²⁶ John O'Brien, *The Unconquered People The Liberation Journey of the Oppressed Class* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012), 148.

I became a Muslim when I was 6 years old after my mother got converted to Islam by marrying a Muslim man. I have been continuously facing problems from my in-laws and husband because of my previous Christian faith. Even my children do not spare calling me a Churi after they have learnt from their father that I was born as a Christian. My mother in-law ridiculed me quite often because of my mother's previous Christian faith. After marrying a Muslim man, my mother took me and my two other sisters with her and we siblings were given Muslim names. My brothers stayed with my Christian father and since then they had stopped meeting us. At the time of my marriage, my mother told my husband about our past religion but my husband did not have any issue at the time. After one year, I realized that my husband wants another woman in his life and he was not affording my expenses. Whenever we had arguments, my husband and my mother in law abused me on account of my previous Christian identity and called me bad names. Once, we were staying with family friends of my husband, the wife of my husband's friend kept my spoon, plate, bed sheet separate on the pretext that I had a Christian faith. There was also a very hard time in my life, when I was pregnant, and my husband accused me of giving birth to a baby of a Christian man. I told him to get a DNA test to confirm. Once, my 14 years old son said to me that when you die, you will be no longer able to earn for us then we will call your Christian family to take her because she is Churi and do her burial. The word Churi pierces me from inside.

Socio-religious hostility manifesting in intimate relations transcends into agony and pain. Lack of social recognition for interfaith marriages and communal resentment between communities of different faiths cause deep anxieties and leave scars difficult to be wiped away from the lived experiences of women. This phenomenon resonates with the work of Bauman on the religious conversion of Dalit women to Upper Caste. He argues that such conversions did not result to emancipation of Dalit women²⁷, rather, it leads to adopting the norms consonant with upper caste Hindus and Victorian Christian values leading to contradiction in Dalit women's range of activities. Responding to the vagaries of life, Zakiya's narrative indicates that she kept coping by compromising and accommodating with new realities of her religiously informed identity, as she said, 'I tried my best to learn Islam and listen to the sermons of Muslim cleric to become a good Muslim.' Accommodating is used as a strategy to create acceptance and a space for self, however this space for self may be perceived by one to be lost in the process of over-accommodation²⁸. As was evident from Zakiya's assertion of losing faith in her Muslim identity because she worried that who would give her last rites at the time of her funeral?

All six women interviewed shared similar views of being socially boycotted by their Christian community and facing religious discrimination from their Muslim relatives on account of their previous Christian identity. Social stress in the form of discrimination along with other social disadvantages entail negative mental health problems and decreased psychological well-being²⁹.

²⁷ Chad M Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion in Hindu India, 1868-1947* (Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 19, 179.

²⁸ Shweta Verma & Neelam Sukhramani, "Interfaith Marriages and Negotiated Spaces," 15.

²⁹ Sarah K. Calabrese, et al., "Exploring discrimination and mental health disparities faced by Black sexual minority women using a minority stress framework," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 39, no 3 (2015): 12.

Conclusion

Cultivating interfaith relations resonate with promoting peace and harmony, honour diversity and plurality among communities of different religions, faiths, beliefs and practices. During the last two decades, Pakistan has been experiencing the use of the term interfaith harmony as reflected in the official policy narratives of Government's Ministry of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony and such a focus is also echoed in the project based activities mostly led by civil society organizations. In such a discourse, scant attention is accorded to the practical realization of interfaith harmony, especially in the context, when such interfaith interactions are turned into intimate interfaith relations.