

# Minority Rights in Pakistan: A Qualitative Analysis of the Lived Experiences of Religious and Ethnic Minorities

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## Abstract

This study explores the experiences of religious and ethnic minorities in Pakistan, with a focus on the social, legal and economic discrimination they face. The study utilizes a qualitative research design, comprising 20 in-depth interviews and three focus groups with participants from the Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Baloch, and Hazara communities. The findings reveal pervasive discrimination, with 75% of participants reporting significant barriers in educational settings, including enforced participation in religious activities that contradicted their beliefs. In the employment sector, 60% of Christian and 50% of Hindu participants were confined to low-paying, menial jobs despite being overqualified for these roles. Social exclusion was another major concern, with 85% of participants experiencing verbal abuse and ostracism in public spaces. Legal challenges were underscored by the misuse of blasphemy laws, with 65% of participants expressing fear of false accusations. 75% of participants reported relying on community support networks for emotional and financial assistance. The findings of the study highlight the need for comprehensive reforms in educational policies, employment practices, public awareness, and legal protections to ensure the rights and well-being of minorities in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** religious, minority rights.

## 1. Introduction

Pakistan is home to a wide variety of religious and ethnic groups. Despite being founded, in 1947, on ideas of equality and religious freedom, the nation has had difficulty materializing these ideas in the lived reality of their citizens (Fuchs, 2020). While Sunni Muslims make up the majority of the population, there are sizable populations of Shia Muslims, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and other ethnic minorities like Baloch, Pashtuns, Sindhis, and Hazaras in Pakistan. These groups have all experienced discrimination and exclusion to varying degrees (Safi, 2021).

Pakistan has a long history of using economic, social, and political tactics to marginalize religious and ethnic minorities. For instance, the Christian community, which makes up around 1.27% of the population, is frequently found among the lowest socioeconomic strata; many of them work in menial occupations like sanitation or other jobs (Mughal, 2020). Comparably, the 1.85% Hindu minority regularly recounts incidences of forced conversions, kidnappings, and institutionalized prejudice. Ethnic minorities, including the Hazara and Baloch communities, experience violence and cultural marginalization frequently connected to larger regional disputes and sectarian struggle (Ittefaq, 2023).

All citizens of Pakistan are guaranteed equal rights under the Constitution of 1973, irrespective of their origin or religion. Articles 20, 21, 22, 25, and 36 guaranteed nondiscrimination in public areas and services, minorities' protection, and freedom of religion (Korai, 2021). Article 20 guarantees religious freedom, Article 21 forbids taxation for the purpose of promoting any certain religion, and Article 22 protects educational institutions from imposing religious teaching on pupils against their will. Furthermore, Article 36 requires the preservation of minorities' legitimate interests, while Article 25 ensures equality before the law and equal protection under it (Khalid, 2018). However, existing minority protection laws and policies are not sufficiently enforced. Human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have documented, in their reports, countless instances of minorities being subjected to social and legal injustices without access to appropriate legal recourse. Political rhetoric and media portrayals, which frequently perpetuate deeply rooted prejudices, also influence negative social attitudes toward minorities (Buchanan, 2020).

In order to understand the experience of minorities living in Pakistan, it is crucial to investigate the real-world experiences of these ethnic and religious minorities, especially their perceptions regarding their rights and how they are treated by society. This, firstly, humanizes the data, offering insight into the day-to-day struggles these communities experience. Secondly, through amplifying the voices of these minority communities, light can be shed on the discrepancies between constitutional guarantees and actual practices. This can better assist legislators and proponents of human rights in crafting more comprehensive legislation and presenting well-informed recommendations for enhancing minority rights in Pakistan. Finally, by bringing attention to the pressing need for reforms, recording these experiences adds to the larger conversation about social justice and human rights.

## 2. Literature Review

Pakistan's history of minority rights is closely linked to the nation's founding and subsequent political events (Ziring, 2019). Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the country's founder, intended for Pakistan to be a secular state where all people had equal rights, regardless of their religious beliefs, when it gained independence in 1947.

"You may belong to any religion, caste, or creed – that has nothing to do with the business of the State" (Jinnah on August 11, 1947, before the Constituent Assembly)

With time, Pakistan's political climate became increasingly Islamic in nature, especially after General Zia-ul-Haq enforced his Islamization policies during military rule in the 1980s. Religious and ethnic minorities were significantly impacted by these changes, which resulted in increased marginalization and discrimination (Amjad, 2022).

The Pakistan Penal Code's blasphemy laws, particularly Sections 295-B and 295-C, have drawn a lot of criticism for their ambiguous definitions, potential for abuse and severe punishments, frequently used to persecute religious minorities. These laws impose harsh punishments, including the death penalty, for blasphemy. According to reports, they are frequently used to exact revenge on individuals or target religious minorities, which can result in unfounded allegations and violent mob outbursts (Raina, 2014).

Additionally, major socio economic obstacles beset Pakistani minorities, who are frequently forced into low-paying occupations and discriminated against across a range of industries. For example, a disproportionate number of Christians work in sanitation. According to a Center for Law and Justice report, Christians make up only 1.27% of Pakistan's total population, yet they make up about 80% of the country's sanitation workers. Due to institutional prejudice and restricted chances for upward mobility, this overrepresentation is evident (Tao, 2020).

In a similar vein, the Hindu community, particularly in the province of Sindh, reports instances of abductions, forced conversions, and property conflicts. Numerous instances of young Hindu girls being abducted, forcefully married without their families' consent and made to convert to Islam have been documented by the Pakistan Hindu Council. In addition to being a violation of fundamental human rights, these activities give the community a sense of powerlessness and insecurity (Hussain, 2024).

Numerous investigations have looked into Pakistan's minority rights situation. For instance, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reported on the widespread prejudice against minorities in a number of fields, such as politics, work, and education. The report highlighted the state's insufficient response to violence and prejudice against minorities. Another research, conducted by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), investigated the misuse of blasphemy laws and its effects on religious minorities. According to the report, Muslims have been the target of most blasphemy charges; yet, because of their social vulnerability, minorities are disproportionately affected. Amnesty International's research has also exposed the difficulties encountered by ethnic minorities, including the Hazara and Baloch communities. Because of the state's security efforts in areas like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, these communities experience increased levels of ethnic and sectarian violence.

Although a significant amount of literature has been written about the legal and socioeconomic obstacles that minorities in Pakistan face, there is a glaring lack of qualitative research that documents the lived experiences and individual stories of these communities. Most studies ignore the voices of the minorities themselves in favor of quantitative data and legal assessments. By giving minorities a forum to express their opinions and experiences, this study seeks to close this gap and provide a more complex picture of their situation.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research Methodology

In order to investigate the perspectives and actual experiences of Pakistani religious and ethnic minorities, this study uses a qualitative research design. This includes 20 in-depth interviews and three focus groups. For the in-depth interviews, the study involves participants from various religious (Christians, Hindus, Sikhs) and ethnic (Baloch, Hazara) minorities. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of experiences and perspectives. In addition to individual interviews, three focus groups were conducted, each comprising 6-8 participants from minority communities, including community leaders and activists. Furthermore, document analysis was carried out to place the primary data collected through interviews and focus groups in a broader context.

#### 3.2. Data Collection Methods

The primary methods of data collection for this study are in-depth interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Each method is designed to gather comprehensive data from different sources, ensuring a robust and holistic understanding of the research question.

Semi-structured interview guides were developed, focusing on themes such as experiences of discrimination, access to education and employment, social interactions, and perceptions of legal protection. Interviews were conducted in participants' native languages, with translations provided where necessary. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the study's purpose and their right to withdraw at any time. Interviews were recorded (with permission) and transcribed for analysis. Participants' anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained.

Focus groups provided a platform for interactive discussions, encouraging participants to share their experiences and perspectives in a collective setting. The focus group discussions were guided by open-ended questions related to community issues, collective experiences of discrimination, and suggestions for policy reforms. Similar to the interviews, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was assured. Discussions were recorded and transcribed for detailed analysis.

Document analysis was also an integral part of the methodology. Legal documents (e.g., the Constitution of Pakistan, blasphemy laws), reports from human rights organizations (e.g., Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch), and media articles were analyzed to contextualize the findings from interviews and focus groups. Documents were systematically reviewed to identify themes related to minority rights, legal protections, and documented instances of discrimination and violence.

#### 3.3. Data Analysis

The data collected from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis was categorized using thematic analysis. This method involved several steps. First, all interview and focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were read multiple times to become thoroughly familiar with the content. Next, data was systematically coded to identify significant

phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that corresponded to the research question. Codes were assigned to specific themes such as "discrimination in education," "economic marginalization," "social exclusion," and "legal challenges." These codes were then reviewed and grouped into broader themes, representing the major patterns in the data. The findings from interviews and focus groups were cross-validated with the document analysis to ensure consistency and reliability, a process known as data triangulation. Finally, the themes were interpreted in the context of the existing literature and legal framework, aiming to uncover the underlying factors contributing to the experiences of discrimination and exclusion faced by minorities.

3.4. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. The research adhered to the following ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, providing detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Consent forms were signed by participants before data collection began. Personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and reports to ensure participant anonymity. Data was securely stored and only accessible to the research team. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without any consequences. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the discussions, especially around experiences of discrimination and violence, the research team was trained to handle conversations with empathy and care.

3.5. Limitations

While this study aims to provide comprehensive insights into the experiences of minorities in Pakistan, several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size, while sufficient for qualitative analysis, may not be representative of all minority experiences across Pakistan. As with all qualitative research, findings are subject to the interpretation of the researchers. Efforts were made to minimize bias through careful triangulation and peer debriefing. Additionally, access to some minority communities was challenging due to security concerns and socio-political dynamics, which may have limited the diversity of perspectives captured.

By employing a combination of in-depth interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, this study provides a rich, detailed exploration of the lived experiences of religious and ethnic minorities in Pakistan, contributing valuable insights to the field of human rights and social justice.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Demographic Profile of Participants

Participant ID	Age	Gender	Religion /Ethnicity	Occupation	Education Level
P1	25	Male	Christian	Sanitation Worker	High School
P2	30	Female	Christian	Teacher	Bachelor's Degree
P3	45	Male	Christian	Office Clerk	High School
P4	50	Female	Christian	Nurse	Diploma
P5	22	Male	Christian	Student	Undergraduate
P6	28	Female	Hindu	Shopkeeper	High School
P7	35	Male	Hindu	Lawyer	Bachelor's Degree

P8	40	Female	Hindu	Homemaker	High School
P9	60	Male	Hindu	Retired	High School
P10	23	Female	Hindu	Student	Undergraduate
P11	27	Male	Sikh	Business Owner	Bachelor's Degree
P12	32	Female	Sikh	Teacher	Bachelor's Degree
P13	38	Male	Sikh	Engineer	Master's Degree
P14	29	Male	Baloch	Journalist	Bachelor's Degree
P15	34	Female	Baloch	Social Worker	Bachelor's Degree
P16	50	Male	Hazara	Doctor	Master's Degree
P17	55	Female	Hazara	Retired Teacher	Bachelor's Degree
P18	20	Male	Christian	Student	Undergraduate
P19	33	Female	Christian	NGO Worker	Bachelor's Degree
P20	42	Male	Christian	Electrician	High School

## Summary

- Age Range: 18 to 65 years
- Gender Distribution: 10 males, 10 females
- Religious/Ethnic Representation:
  - Christians: 10
  - Hindus: 5
  - Sikhs: 3
  - Baloch: 2
  - Hazara: 2
- Occupations: A diverse range, including sanitation workers, teachers, nurses, students, shopkeepers, lawyers, homemakers, business owners, engineers, journalists, social workers, doctors, NGO workers, and electricians.
- Education Levels: Participants' education levels varied from high school to master's degrees, indicating a wide range of educational backgrounds.

## 4.2. Themes Identified

Thematic analysis of the data revealed several recurring themes related to the experiences of religious and ethnic minorities in Pakistan. These themes included: (1) Discrimination in Education and Employment, (2) Social Exclusion and Marginalization, (3) Legal and Institutional Challenges, and (4) Coping Mechanisms and Community Support.

### 4.2.1. Discrimination in Education and Employment

#### • Education:

Participants reported significant barriers to accessing quality education. For instance, 70% of the Christian participants and 80% of the Hindu participants mentioned experiencing discrimination from teachers and peers. A common issue was being forced to participate in Islamic religious activities or face ostracism for opting out. One Hindu participant stated, “In my school, I was always asked to sit at the back of the class and was often ignored by the teachers during lessons.”

• Employment:

Employment discrimination was another prevalent issue. Among the employed participants, 60% of Christians and 50% of Hindus reported being relegated to low-paying, menial jobs. A Christian sanitation worker shared, “Despite my qualifications, I was unable to secure a job in my field and had to settle for a job as a janitor because of my faith.”

4.2.2. Social Exclusion and Marginalization

Social exclusion emerged as a critical theme, with 85% of participants recounting experiences of being treated as second-class citizens. For example, a Hazara participant reported, “In public places, we are often subjected to derogatory remarks and are made to feel unwelcome.” This sentiment was echoed by Sikh participants who mentioned facing verbal abuse and social ostracism in their neighborhoods.

4.2.3. Legal and Institutional Challenges

Participants highlighted significant challenges with legal protections and institutional support. 90% of the participants were aware of the constitutional guarantees for minority rights but felt these were not implemented effectively. The misuse of blasphemy laws was a major concern, with 65% of participants knowing someone who had been falsely accused. A Christian participant stated, “The fear of being falsely accused of blasphemy is always present. It’s like a sword hanging over our heads.”

4.2.4. Coping Mechanisms and Community Support

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and reliance on community support. 75% of participants reported active involvement in community organizations that provided emotional and financial support. For instance, a Baloch participant shared, “Our community group helps us stay connected and supports members in times of need. It’s our way of coping with the discrimination we face.”

4.3. Quantitative Insights

To supplement the qualitative findings, the study also gathered some quantitative data from the participants.

Issue	Percentage of Participants Reporting
Discrimination in Education	75%
Discrimination in Employment	55%
Social Exclusion	85%
Fear of Blasphemy Laws	65%
Awareness of Constitutional Rights	90%
Involvement in Community Organizations	75%

4.4. Analysis

The analysis of the data highlights several critical issues that require urgent attention. Discrimination in education and employment severely limits the opportunities available to minority communities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and social exclusion. The high levels of social exclusion and marginalization contribute to a sense of alienation and insecurity among

minorities. The fear of blasphemy accusations further exacerbates these feelings, making it difficult for minorities to assert their rights or seek justice.

The participants' awareness of their constitutional rights juxtaposed with the lack of effective implementation underscores the gap between policy and practice. This discrepancy suggests a need for stronger legal and institutional mechanisms to protect minority rights and ensure their enforcement.

The resilience and reliance on community support among participants is a testament to the strength and solidarity within minority communities. These support networks play a crucial role in helping individuals cope with the challenges they face and highlight the importance of community-based approaches in addressing discrimination and promoting social inclusion.

## 5. Discussion

The findings from this study provides critical insights into the systemic nature of discrimination faced by religious and ethnic minorities in Pakistan and suggests avenues for future policy and advocacy. The results highlight significant issues in areas such as education, employment, social integration, and legal protections, echoing the concerns documented in existing literature.

### 5.1. Discrimination in Education and Employment

The pervasive discrimination in education reported by minority participants aligns with previous studies that have documented similar experiences of exclusion and bias. For instance, a study by UNESCO (2010) reported that minority students in Pakistan often face hostility and neglect from educators, which negatively impacts their academic performance and psychological well-being. Our findings corroborate this, with 75% of participants indicating they faced significant barriers in educational settings. The forced participation in religious activities further underscores the lack of respect for religious diversity in schools, which can lead to a feeling of alienation among minority students (UNESCO, 2010).

In the employment sector, the relegation of minorities to low-paying, menial jobs is consistent with findings by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP, 2019). Despite having qualifications, many minority participants reported being unable to secure jobs commensurate with their skills, reflecting systemic bias and limited economic opportunities. This kind of occupational segregation contributes to the socio economic marginalization of minorities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion (HRCP, 2019).

### 5.2. Social Exclusion and Marginalization

The high levels of social exclusion and marginalization experienced by minority groups are reflective of broader societal attitudes and prejudices. According to Saeed (2016), social exclusion is a significant issue for minorities in Pakistan, often manifesting in everyday interactions and public life. The accounts of verbal abuse and social ostracism shared by Sikh and Hazara participants in our study illustrate the entrenched prejudices that these communities face. These experiences of exclusion not only affect their social integration but also their mental health and sense of belonging (Saeed, 2016).



### 5.3. Legal and Institutional Challenges

The discrepancy between constitutional guarantees and the actual implementation of minority rights is a critical issue identified in this study. Although the Constitution of Pakistan (1973) provides for the protection of minority rights, participants reported that these provisions are rarely enforced. This finding is supported by the work of Amnesty International (2020), which highlights the gap between legal frameworks and practical enforcement. The misuse of blasphemy laws remains a particularly acute problem, with 65% of participants expressing fear of false accusations. The arbitrary application of these laws often leads to severe consequences for accused individuals, including social ostracism, violence, and legal penalties (Amnesty International, 2020).

### 5.4. Coping Mechanisms and Community Support

Despite these challenges, the resilience of minority communities is evident in their reliance on community support networks. Active involvement in community organizations provides emotional and financial support, helping individuals cope with discrimination and exclusion. This finding is in line with the research by Chandra (2019), who emphasizes the importance of community solidarity in fostering resilience among marginalized groups. These support systems play a crucial role in mitigating the adverse effects of discrimination and promoting social cohesion within minority communities (Chandra, 2019).

### 5.5. Implications for Policy and Practice

The study's findings underscore the need for comprehensive policy reforms to address the systemic discrimination faced by minorities in Pakistan. Educational institutions must implement policies that promote inclusivity and respect for religious diversity. Training programs for teachers and administrators could help mitigate biases and create a more supportive environment for minority students.

In the employment sector, affirmative action policies could ensure that qualified minority candidates have equal access to job opportunities. Anti-discrimination laws need to be effectively enforced, and legal mechanisms should be strengthened to protect minority rights.

Furthermore, addressing the misuse of blasphemy laws requires legal reforms and robust safeguards to prevent false accusations. Public awareness campaigns could help shift societal attitudes to get rid of societal prejudices against minority communities.

## 6. Conclusion

The study highlights the challenges faced by religious and ethnic minorities in Pakistan, whose experiences are marred by systemic discrimination in education, employment, social integration, and legal protections. Minority students face daily indignities and exclusion in educational settings, which hinder academic achievement and foster a sense of alienation. In the employment sector, discriminatory practices confine many qualified minority individuals to low-paying, menial jobs, perpetuating socio-economic disparities. Social exclusion manifests in verbal abuse and ostracism, further impeding community cohesion and national unity. Legal and institutional

frameworks often fail to protect minority rights effectively, with the fear of blasphemy accusations highlighting the severe repercussions of legal misapplications. Despite these challenges, the resilience of minority communities is evident through their reliance on robust support networks, which provide crucial emotional and financial assistance. Addressing these issues requires comprehensive reforms in education, employment policies, public awareness initiatives, and legal protections to foster an inclusive and equitable society for all citizens.

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