

Invisible Targets of Hatred: Socioeconomically Excluded Women from Religious Minority Backgrounds

Mariz Tadros

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Summary

This paper endeavours to make visible the targeting of poor women from religious minorities in contexts where society and/or the state both engage in religious 'otherisation'. The paper seeks to contribute to addressing the blind spot in both feminist and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) scholarship on the experiences of the intersection of religious marginality, economic exclusion, and gender inequality. The main arguments of this paper are presented in five key propositions which describe and analyse the ways in which the interface between targeting and vulnerability influence the position of women who belong to religious minorities. The final part of the paper elucidates the interconnections among the multiple threads informing these propositions and what accounts for their prevalence.

Keywords: Women, religious minority, economic exclusion, targeting, vulnerability.

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Acronyms

BBOG	Bring Back Our Girls
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
CREID	Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development
CSO	civil society organisation
FGD	focus group discussion
FoRB	freedom of religion or belief
HJM	Hindu Jagran Manch
IDP	internally displaced people
IDS	Institute of Development Studies
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
LGBTQI	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex
MRG	Minority Rights Group
NRC	National Register of Citizens
SOGI	sexual orientation and gender identity
USCIRF	United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Introduction

This paper endeavours to make visible the targeting of poor women from religious minorities in contexts where society and/or the state both engage in religious 'otherisation'. The two key questions informing this inquiry are first, how are the experiences of poor women from religiously marginalised backgrounds different from other poor women from the same context? Second, how are the experiences of poor women from religiously marginalised backgrounds different from poor men from the same background?

The contentious nature of these questions is well noted: why focus on women who belong to religious minorities in particular? Does this not encourage narrow thinking insofar as it creates new reified categories and classifications?

These concerns are legitimate and are addressed in the first part of this paper, which discusses the rationale for focusing on women from religiously, economically excluded backgrounds. More specifically, it makes the case that, with a few exceptions, they have slipped through the cracks of both the copious scholarship on feminism as well as that of the burgeoning sphere of freedom of religion or belief. This paper aims to contribute to addressing this gap by highlighting the nexus of women's equality and freedom of religion or belief insofar as it seeks to make visible the invisible experiences of women marginalised by the intersection of gender, religious affiliation, and class. It recognises from the outset that terms such as women from religious minority backgrounds, religious otherisation, and targeting are not without their problems; all need to be problematised. The epistemic approach informing their operationalisation is also discussed in the methodology section that follows.

The main arguments of this paper are presented in five key propositions, with the first one serving as an anchor for the others. Notwithstanding the acknowledgement that people have many identities that work together to affect their status and role, when women are poor and they belong to religious minorities in settings where religious 'otherisation' is prevalent, they will experience power and powerlessness in particular ways.

The second proposition makes visible the ways in which the bodies of women who belong to religious minorities are used as battlegrounds in political and geostrategic struggles. We argue that while there is 'tactical opportunism' involved in using them as pawns, their targeting is ideologically motivated and exacerbated on account of their socioeconomic vulnerability.

The third proposition describes a more difficult to detect, pernicious form of targeting that often initially does not involve the overt use of force: ideologically driven forms of sexual grooming of girls and women.

The fourth proposition looks at the responses from within the community to all forms of sexual violence and how communities' engagement with issues of gender equality influence minority women's trajectories. It particularly looks at how the positioning of the broader community as a religious minority, and how their religiously inspired conceptions of honour, impact on religious minority women.

Having engaged with the politics, political economy, and social norms that influence the positioning and targeting of women who happen to be poor and come from religious minorities in the first four propositions, the fifth and last proposition engages with the legal arena as a site of direct and indirect disproportionate harm to women who belong to religious minorities, in particular those who happen to suffer from multiple economic and social vulnerabilities.

The final part of the paper elucidates the interconnections among the multiple threads informing these propositions. For every one of these, similar claims can be made for poor women more broadly or for women with other identifiers, such as those belonging to ethnic or linguistic minorities or indigenous movements where the norms are of homogenisation. This is undoubtedly true; however, by presenting these propositions, the intention here is not to create a hierarchy of those who suffer the most. There is no implicit suggestion from this critical inquiry that poor, religiously marginalised women are those who suffer the most or worst forms of encroachment. Rather, it is to establish the case for the recognition of their targeting, and where relevant, to challenge the claims that such targeting is exclusively on the basis of their gender, ethnicity, class, or even geographic location.

While the paper recognises the intersections of inequalities and intertwining drivers of vulnerability, it also endeavours to make explicit the nexus between gender, religious

marginality, and poverty. This is critically important because without this recognition, religiously marginalised economically excluded women will continue to fall between the cracks, experiencing patterns of inequality, discrimination, and violence that are overlooked, ignored, or minimised.

1. Conceptual framing and interpretive framework

The nexus between freedom of religion or belief and women's equality covers a wide array of issues and conundrums. However, this paper focuses on one particular problématique: the experiences of poor women from religious minorities living in contexts of religious otherisation.

All of these terms are contentious. For example, the term 'poor' may be seen as reifying identities, the term 'women' may be seen as exclusionary of more gender-fluid identities, and the term 'religious minorities' is replete with complexity, given that there is a considerable diversity of practices/beliefs within all religions which are not always welcomed. Minorities can be recognised or unrecognised. A group that is a minority in the national context may be a majority and dominate power and decision-making in another province or locality or country.

'Religious minorities' and 'religious otherisation' may sound 'fuzzy' to some. Here, a clarification of the use of these terms and the rationale for a focus on this particular problématique is needed.

1.1 Freedom of religion or belief

Freedom of religion or belief is a very broad term that encompasses those exercising faith and no faith. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights offers a broad and helpful definition of freedom of religion or belief:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (UN 1948).¹

UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, notes that the right to freedom of religion or belief belongs to individuals, not religions. This very much informs the parameters of this inquiry insofar as the focus is on the experiences of exclusion or marginalisation of women and men as a result of coming from a religious

¹ www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/

minority background. Being of a religious minority background may be by choice (having a sense of belonging) or prescribed by default on account of having been born into a community which identifies with a particular religion. The focus on the rights to freedom of religion or belief for women of a religious minority background has implications for this inquiry insofar that it is not just encroachments from people who belong to the mainstream religion that are addressed but also those features/factors that emanate from the practices within one's own religion. In other words, there are always going to be several layers of power dynamics at work, both within women's own religious communities and their relationship with the broader community.

The intersection of gender and religious affiliation in patriarchal contexts has long been recognised as one presenting tensions between a religious community's right to preserve its communal practices and internal organisation and an individual's right to be free from the violation of their right to gender equality (for excellent examples of this debate see Nazila Ghanea 2018, Petersen 2020, Shaheed 2020).

1.2 Women's equality

Women's equality also needs definition. Our inquiry's focus on challenging power relations is influenced by Kate Young's work on challenging gender power relations between women and men (Young 1993). We understand that women with more gender-fluid identities would have wide arrays of struggles beyond that of equality between women and men, but the focus on power relations between women and men as informing the definition of women's equality adopted here is informed by the fact that our subjects were heterosexual women (see below).

We now turn our attention to the focus of our inquiry; that is, heterosexual women who are of religious minority heritage or faith as distinct from both those who identify with more fluid gender identities and those from within mainstream dominant religious backgrounds, whether by choice or circumstance. We concur with Petersen's eloquently presented argument regarding the fact that when we refer to gender and freedom of religion or belief, this encompasses a wide array of differently positioned subjects:

Women and girls in religious minorities may be particularly vulnerable to intersectional discrimination, but people in majority religious communities can also experience gendered consequences of FoRB violations, or experience gender

discrimination in particular ways because of their particular religious affiliation and identity, for instance religious feminists, reformers or others from the religious majority who interpret their religion in ways that challenge the orthodoxy. Women who are atheists, humanists or other types of non-believers, or who refrain from practicing their religion may also experience various forms of intersectional discrimination. Around the globe, SOGI [sexual orientation and gender identity] minorities face restrictions on where and how they can practice their faith, imposed by the state, religious authorities as well as the broader society (Petersen 2020: 16).

While all the groups mentioned above experience the intertwining of gender inequality and violation of their freedom of religion or belief, they have very different positionalities. Positionality is a feminist theoretical concept that challenges the notion of value-free objective social inquiry and highlights that not only does the person's own subjectivity (class, gender, race, etc.) influence how they engage with reality but also how people perceive him/her, often independently of whether these perceptions are aligned with the person's own self-identification, attitudes, beliefs, or actions. This is critical in that heterosexual women who belong to religious minorities will often be very differently positioned in relation to their own religious institutions' hierarchies and in relation to broader gender hierarchies in society than women from the same communities who happen to be LGBTQI+.

This would also apply to the positionality of women who are challenging gender/religious hierarchies while being situated within dominant/mainstream religions. The same is true with respect to the positionality of religious minority women who are challenging conservative interpretations that circumscribe their rights emanating from within religious hierarchies. How society engages with them is often greatly influenced by their association with their religious minority group. This in turn means that the kind of hierarchies in which they are situated are distinct from those affecting women in general in those societies. Women who are contesting the nexus of gender and religious practice from within the religious majority would be engaging in a set of struggles that are greatly shaped by their own positionality.

In addition to the notion of differentiated positionalities, this inquiry endeavours to make a very specific contribution on patterns of inequality associated with economic

vulnerability and religious marginality. It looks at these patterns of inequality in terms of how they affect women belonging to religious minorities across contexts. This complements existing scholarship on the nexus of gender and freedom of religion or belief, which is broader in its coverage of LGBTQI+ and women from mainstream religions (i.e. Petersen 2020 and Shaheed 2020). They both cover a plurality of genders as well as women from mainstream religious backgrounds (Shaheed 2020). A special compilation of articles in *IDS Bulletin* 41.5 (Tadros 2010) also engages with the struggles of feminists who challenge the encroachment of both the instrumentalisation of religion and gender by state and non-state actors to circumscribe rights.

1.3 Religious minority women

The third term that requires elaboration is 'religious minority women'. Labelling women as religious minority women can be a form of reification that is completely dissonant with their own way of representing themselves. Worse, such forms of labelling can be politically so offensive that they can be seen locally within religious minority groups as driven by an external political agenda to create incendiary fault-lines in a community. The only way to circumvent this is to be clear that our use of 'religious minority women' is descriptive, not normative. Methodologically, it is also key that women have the space to self-describe without having to feel under pressure – overt or covert – to 'insert' themselves under any label.

In many contexts, it is still very dangerous to self-identify as a member of a religious group and therefore people sometimes conceal their identities: for example, for the Ahmadis in Pakistan or the Kakais in Iraq. There needs to be a modicum of civil and political liberties in a country to create an enabling environment for women to self-name without coming under risk of complete repression.

In India, the term 'minority women' is officially used; for example, there is a Ministry of Minority Affairs which has specific programmes for minority women. In Myanmar, the term minority women is not used at all and when women identify themselves by their geographic or ethnic identity, this brings them into direct confrontation with the state and society. For example, to self-represent as Rohingya women would incur hostility from the Burmese government, which recognises the population presiding in that state as Bengali migrants.

In Pakistan, referring to Ahmadi women as a religious minority risks denying their faith (as under Pakistani law, religious minorities are defined as 'non-Muslims'). In Tajikistan, women who can organise by language group or ethnicity cannot organise as religious minorities as this is far more politically sensitive and invites state interference. In Nigeria, Christian and Muslim women would only be considered a numerical and political minority by region since the demographic composition between the two is very similar. Only Animists, Atheists, and denominations within these two main religions would be a minority in all parts of the country.

In Iraq, there are several coalitions, networks, and collective platforms that have emerged since the American-led invasion, formed to respond to the threats to religious pluralism in the country: for example, the Coalition of Iraqi Minorities Network. There is no specific platform for women from minorities. The latter either organise under strong women's networks (all encompassing) or under minority networks, or often through both. Perhaps they did not see a need for specific representation when both platforms allow for an engagement with the intersection of gender and marginality.

In Egypt, the challenge of organising as minority women emanates from the deep discomfort associated with the word 'minority'. Similarly to several Middle Eastern contexts, in Egypt, the term religious minority conjures negative images. To be a minority is to be a foreigner with no claims of indigeneity; it is to be in collusion with the West and needing special protection. Where did these associations emanate from? Seteny Shami (2009) argues that the first time the word minority entered the lexicon of terms used to describe Christians in the region was in the early 1920s, when political elites were debating whether the new Egyptian constitution should include specific language concerning the protection of religious minorities. The British colonialist labelling of non-Muslim communities in Egypt as minorities was a political project, according to Shami, intended to justify colonialist control over matters of internal governance.

Many champions of national liberation emphasised that their countries were not divided along religious lines and that to talk of religious minorities would be to endorse colonialist divide-and-rule strategies for the justification of interventionist policies. In many cases where the term minority was introduced by colonialists in the Middle East, it became associated in the minds of the colonised with the religion of the coloniser. This

led indigenous churches that have existed in the region for centuries to declare their ties to the land by insisting they are not minorities.

Caste is another special case concerning religious minority women. Hindu women prescribed to belong to a 'low caste' may not differ to any great extent in their religious beliefs or practices from other caste women from the same religious community. However, they do not believe that caste should be a determinant of inequality in society or that religious doctrine mandates that this should be so. This crucial difference means that those who are affected by and resist caste oppression constitute a religious minority.

Therefore, in contexts where historical appropriation of the term minority makes it socially/politically undesirable to use, or where its usage would elicit a crackdown, what frames of reference do women use to talk about themselves, their lives and experiences? Despite the differences within and across women, groups, and communities, there are multiple narratives shared with different audiences for different purposes.

However, beyond the ideological, political, and historical reasons why there may be conundrums associated with the term 'religious minority women', there may also be issues of strategic framing in relation to the audience with which women are engaging. For example, when girls were kidnapped in Nigeria in 2014 by Boko Haram, even though they happened to be majority Christian and their religious affiliation was a key driver of their targeting (see proposition two), the movement to hold the government to account for its responsibility to rescue them and to hold the kidnappers accountable did not organise to press for their rights as 'religious minority girls', nor did they organise along religious lines. In a comprehensive review of the *Bring Back Our Girls* movement, Aina *et al.* note that:

The #BBOG remained a non-faith-based movement. Its activists come from across all faiths and there were efforts to sustain an interfaith posture through the composition of the leadership that included both Christians and Muslims (Aina *et al.* 2019: 25).

In the context of Nigerian politics, any use of religious labelling could be appropriated by political forces to divert attention from the issue. Similarly, in India, when Muslim women mobilised against the discriminatory citizenship law that was promulgated by the Indian government, they chose to do so under the banner of being Indian citizens, lifting

high Indian flags, rather than as a persecuted Muslim minority (which they are). Such a strategic action was informed by their encouragement of the broader Indian polity to join them in protecting the Indian constitution rather than perceiving them as an interest-based group in a political struggle with the status quo.

For the above reasons, this critical inquiry differentiates between the descriptive use of women who belong to religious minorities/are from religious minority backgrounds and the normative representation of women, which is not only ideological, historical, and political, but also highly fluid, shifting according to the audience at hand.

1.4 Poverty and intersecting inequalities

The second important qualifier regarding the term 'women who belong to religious minorities' used in this inquiry is to take note of the fact that there is no homogenous group called 'poor religious minority women'. The labelling of individuals/communities as poor is politically contentious since people may not describe themselves as such.

Moreover, within and among religious minorities in any given context, there are very large disparities politically, economically, socially, and ideologically. A wealthy Shia woman living in Islamabad is in a very different position to a poor low-caste Hindu woman living in the same context. In fact, the Muslim Shia woman may not even wish to associate with the Hindu woman on caste and faith grounds. Hence, again, the term poor is used descriptively in terms of socioeconomic exclusion, rather than normatively as a label.

Experiences of *intersecting inequalities* should not be confused with assuming *intersecting identities*. Religious, ethnic, and other identities are subject to change in representation across time and context, as previously mentioned. However, the disentangling of ethnicity from religious identity is not always so straightforward. For example, historically in Myanmar with respect to the Muslims who lived in Rakhine State, 'for successive generations their ethnicity and Islam have been practically not distinguishable' (Chan 2005: 414). One of the greatest challenges to the recognition of freedom of religion or belief violations is when there is oversight of the fact that people are targeted because of their ethnic and religious identifiers. For example, in northern Nigeria and Myanmar, conflict is driven by both inter-ethnic tensions but also attempted

religious homogenisation by extremist Muslims and Buddhists respectively (Open Doors 2020).

Certainly these identifiers, while distinct, are deeply intertwined, influencing the kind of vulnerabilities that women experience. As will be suggested in proposition one, when you are a poor (socioeconomic status) woman (gender) living in a community where religious bigotry is rising, you may not be able to afford to move elsewhere. You may also be in a position where due to limited skills and connections, the options for income generation are limited and therefore what is available exposes you to particular forms of encroachment that a middle or upper-class woman would be able to avoid. Yet when you are accused of blasphemy – and you belong to a religious minority – it is difficult to simply reduce this to ethnic identity. Class and gender have affected the nature of your exposure and vulnerability, but the accusation is not only about ethnicity, but religion. Making visible ways in which multiple identifiers create vulnerabilities that are not equally experienced among women and men is critical for understanding how people come to be targeted.

Another critical reason informing why this inquiry is focused on intersecting inequalities rather than identities is because the latter is often framed in highly individualistic terms. Westocentric conceptions of agency are often construed around very individualistic ideas of personhood. It is critically important to note that women's lives are interconnected. While we focus on the intersecting inequalities/vulnerabilities experienced by a woman, it does not mean that vulnerabilities experienced by men do not directly and personally affect her.

Moreover, one of the reasons why this paper's focus is on the intersection of vulnerabilities rather than identities is because the experience of inequality should not be confused with identity. People may experience inequalities but their self-perception and representation of themselves may not be a perfect mirror of what they experience. In other words, women may experience religious persecution but may not identify as 'persecuted'; they may be poor but they may refuse to project themselves as 'poor' and so forth. Moreover, experiences of vulnerability do not preclude full exercise of women's agency as manifested in acts of resistance, subversion, and strategic accommodation, to which we will make reference throughout. Finally, women can also be perpetrators of

violations of freedom of religion or belief and exercise leadership in ways that subjugate other women and men (Petersen 2020).

1.5 Religious otherisation

In understanding the experiences of religious marginality of women from religious minority and poor backgrounds, our inquiry refers to another concept that needs elucidation: religious otherisation. Religious otherisation here refers to both a process and an outcome. There is a process of religious otherisation inherent in who is included/excluded and processes of establishing hierarchies of worth/value. By religious otherisation, we mean more than having a different religion. We refer to where differences become the basis of identifying you as 'the other', as someone who is not 'one of us'. With reference to the use of the term religious otherisation in our context, it is reflective of a relationship of power, rather than a numerical status.

To be a woman and a member of a religious minority does not automatically mean being persecuted. It can also mean being part of a religious minority that enjoys a position of privilege, not subordination: for example, being a woman and an Alawi in pre-civil war Syria, or a Sunni woman who belongs to the wealthy class in Bahrain. When we talk about religious otherisation, we don't just mean a numerical minority, but a minority in relation to the exercise of power in various domains – political, economic, social, and cultural. Some insidious processes of religious otherisation are so subtle that they are easy to overlook, especially when they are not accompanied by overt forms of violence or force (see proposition three on grooming).

Religious otherisation is also an outcome, in the sense that it often endeavours to achieve religious homogenisation, whether violently through religious cleansing and demographic engineering or more subtly by making day-to-day life so impossible that people have no option but to deny their religious identity and assimilate or leave. In one sense, religious homogenisation is a political project, a vision shared by a set of actors for how society and politics should be organised.

In our inquiry, we explore patterns of insidious long-term religious otherisation through systemic discriminatory economic policies (see proposition one) or through specific processes and acts. Targeting is complex and can take many different forms but essentially it refers to the purposeful identification of certain individuals or groups on the

basis of particular traits with the intent to act on them. This is very clear in the politically orchestrated sexual grooming of Hindu girls and women in Pakistan as per proposition three. It can also refer to the pre-existence of certain characteristics (for example, the intersection of religion, gender, and socioeconomic vulnerability, or geographic location) that makes individuals or communities vulnerable to becoming the object of action even if such action is not pre-planned. For example, Iraq is majority Shia; however, Turkmen Shia women living in areas occupied by ISIS would be a minority. In this context, religious otherisation is context-bound, influenced by factors such as living in areas occupied by a force of a different denomination.

2. Methodology

The paper draws on primary and secondary data from six contexts (Egypt, Pakistan, Myanmar, Nigeria, India, and Iraq). In the initial stage, secondary data was collected and analysed on the situation of women and men in these six countries. The choice of contexts, with the exception of India, was on the basis that these are countries in which the CREID programme is being implemented. India was added on the basis of its heightened state of religious otherisation and on account of its promotion of an expression of religious homogenisation from a faith that was not represented as a majority religion in the other five contexts (Hindu majoritarianism).

The contexts under study are all ones experiencing major challenges to social cohesion which have in the past or are currently experiencing high levels of communal violence. Iraq and Myanmar have had genocides against religious minorities, there is a genocide alert for Nigeria, Egypt is fighting an internal insurgency by terrorists in Sinai, Pakistan's denial of rights to its many religious minorities is acute, while India has witnessed a major deterioration in its treatment of religious minorities, in particular Muslims. All six countries are ones where the policies and practices of religious homogenisation and otherisation are both visible and subtle. These are all contexts where the size of the population of religious minorities varies. In Nigeria, Christians and Muslims represent roughly equal proportions of the population, with a very small Animist percentage. Thus, we refer to 'contexts' rather than countries as in this particular case we are exploring the context of northern Nigeria, where Christians are a minority, or in Iraq where Shias in some parts of the country represent a minority. The use of the word 'contexts' as opposed to 'countries' in the pages that follow also reflect the fact that self-identification by religious groups will differ from one geographic area to another. For example, the Rohingya people from Rakhine State are Muslim; however, there is also another group from Rakhine State who are Muslim but do not identify as Rohingya (MRG 2019).

In Egypt, the Copts account for 10 per cent of the population. In Iraq, 97 per cent of the population is Muslim. Shia Muslims constitute 55 to 60 per cent of the population. Sunni Muslims are approximately 40 per cent of the population, while Christians, Shabak, Yazidis, Kakais, Sabeans, and Bahais all constitute a tiny (and decreasing) percentage of the non-Muslim population (US State Department 2019c). In India, 'Hindus constitute 79.8 percent of the population, Muslims 14.2 percent, Christians 2.3 percent, and Sikhs

1.7 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians (Parsis), Jews, and Baha'is' (US State Department 2019).

In Pakistan, 80–85 per cent of the population is Muslim, of which 'Shia, including Hazara, Ismaili, and Bohra (a branch of Ismaili), are generally believed to make up 15–20 percent'. (US State Department 2019a). Unofficial estimates vary widely with regard to the size of minority religious groups. Religious community representatives estimate religious groups not identifying as Sunni, Shia, or Ahmadi Muslim constitute 3 to 5 per cent of the population, while community sources put the number of Ahmadi Muslims at approximately 500,000–600,000 (*ibid*).

In Myanmar, approximately 88 per cent of the population are Theravada Buddhists. Approximately 6 per cent are Christians (primarily Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Anglicans, along with several small Protestant denominations). Muslims (mostly Sunni) comprise approximately 4 per cent of the population and there is a tiny percentage who practise indigenous religions (US State Department 2019b).

The fact that these six contexts comprise processes of religious otherisation initiated by powerholders from different religious backgrounds (Hindu in India, Muslim in Iraq, northern Nigeria, Pakistan, and Egypt, Buddhist in Myanmar) was important methodologically for exploring whether these recurring patterns are in any way associated with the nature of the dominant religion of those who wield power. The fact that these represent very different religious backgrounds and yet we could identify patterns (represented in the propositions) is highly significant. This is analysed further in the section on the 'governmentality of targeting'.

A literature review was undertaken on the position and situation of women from religious minority backgrounds in all six countries. There was a paucity of academic literature exclusively focused on the intersection of religious and socioeconomic marginality affecting women from religious minority backgrounds. There were a few sources in grey literature (mostly from faith-based advocacy or human rights organisations) but even then, where there was a focus on religious marginality experienced by women, the role of class was largely overlooked.

The author also draws on her own action research over the course of over 20 years with the Copts of Egypt, the largest religious minority in the Middle East, and specifically with

Coptic women from marginalised socioeconomic backgrounds. From the author's own research and review of the secondary literature, there were some recurring themes, despite the very different religious composition, historical trajectories, and political configurations on the ground. These themes amounted to some recurring patterns which explain the distinctness of the dynamic intersection and influence of gender, religious marginality, and socioeconomic exclusion on the ground.

The five propositions together represent the starting point of an iterative process of framing, data gathering, and validation and a continued revisiting of our assumptions. Initially, the author had framed 11 different propositions of the relationships between gender, religious marginality, and socioeconomic exclusion as they relate to women from religious minorities in these six countries. In order to validate their framing, relevance, validity, and accuracy, a workshop was held between 21–24 January 2020 in Brighton, UK, convened by the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID). The purpose of the workshop was to gain a greater understanding of the intersectionality of inequalities, specifically of being a woman and a member of a marginalised religious group in one of CREID's five programme countries; Egypt, Iraq, Myanmar, Nigeria, and Pakistan; and to develop a collective and comparative understanding across these country contexts of the implications of this for women's positions and roles in relation to the state, social justice, and development policy and practice more broadly.

Sensitivity to positionality was at the heart of the selection of participants. *Who* was collecting the data and *how* the data was collected and used is of equal importance (and one can argue of greater importance) than *what* was being collected. Through the CREID programme, we identified lay women and men from within the communities in four of the five contexts whose positionalities granted them legitimacy and trust within their communities. This is on account of being activists raising issues of discrimination, or practitioners engaged in community service and support, or both. In all cases, they are considered leaders whether they assume formal or informal leadership positions in their contexts. This is not to suggest that they 'represent' their communities given that communities are multi-vocal and diverse, and the boundaries of where a community starts and ends are very blurred. In addition, we invited feminist-scholars from Egypt, Pakistan, and other countries who were able to serve as critical allies, probing and challenging as well as providing cross-country comparisons. The selection of participants was also informed by fairly common standpoints in relation to gender, class, and

religious inclusivity in the sense that all shared a commitment to social justice for the poor, for women's equality, and for religiously plural and inclusive societies.

In the workshop, we collectively visited the propositions which resonated widely with participants' own analysis of their contexts through examples and specific case studies, many of which are shared in this paper. We also sought to analyse patterns of inequality in terms of whether the nature of vulnerability can be explained with respect to religious marginality, gender, or class, or the intersections of all. This was extremely important in order to distinguish between experiences of vulnerability that face all poor women regardless of religious affiliation, those that are specific to women of a particular religious group, and those that affect both women and men of a religious minority. In the process of gauging the divergences and convergences across different contexts, we thought best to merge some of the propositions so that they would encompass a wide array of experiences. The author also reworded some of the propositions for greater clarity as to what exactly distinguishes those patterns characterising the nexus between gender, religious marginality, and economic exclusion. We also interrogated some of the drivers behind these patterns of inequality, drawing both on historical *longue durée* readings of power configurations in these contexts as well as the role of dynamic, new exacerbating factors.

3. Proposition One: Intersecting vulnerabilities

People have many identities that work together to affect their status and their role. When women are poor and they belong to religious minorities, they will experience power and powerlessness in particular ways.

There is broad consensus around the role of class and inequality in shaping the wellbeing prospects of people living in poverty (ISSC, IDS and UNESCO 2016). The intertwining of gender and economic discrimination often leads to particular forms of economic exclusion faced by poor women (*ibid*). However, experiences of economic exclusion can be further compounded by the fact that not only are the women poor but they belong to religious minorities. This is often overlooked in inequalities literature (such as in the report above which makes no mention of religious inequalities of any kind).

Gender, class, and religious inequalities generate particular vulnerabilities. First, the opportunities for religious minority women tend to be significantly more restricted in the areas of education and employment, influencing their overall prospects of economic betterment. In Myanmar, the intersection of class, gender, religious affiliation and geographic location has meant that poor Muslim women of Rohingya origin in Rakhine State are acutely disadvantaged in terms of economic opportunities compared to non-Muslims, to men, to the non-poor, and to other Muslims living in other parts of the country. Participants in the CREID workshop noted that although the occupation of a maid is fraught with insecurities – financial, physical, and social, with minimal pay, tenuous conditions, and social stigma – domestic work is available to women from different religious and ethnic backgrounds, but Muslim Rohingya women are excluded. Many Burmese households consider Muslim Rohingya women as impure and would not hire them (comments from activists attending the workshop).

In Pakistan, members of the Hindu and Christian community are expected to assume the lowest paid, most dangerous, most socially stigmatised professions. A combination of caste, poverty, and religious affiliation severely circumscribes the employment and income-generating opportunities available to these women. Disproportionately, they are expected to be the maids and the cleaners. A particular term is used to delineate their

positioning in society, *Chuhra*, a stigmatised term representing a source of impurity and pollution. Firdus, a poor Christian living in Pakistan, pointed out: 'Some believe we are born for this dirty sanitation and cleaning work and scornfully call us "*chuhra*" (a modern equivalent might be 'toilet cleaner')' (Aqeel 2020). She notes that the process of otherisation is one experienced from society at large as they are perceived to be engaged in dirty work, so other groups keep at a safe distance.

The intersection of gender, religious affiliation, and class with respect to women who belong to religious minorities influences the repertoires or resources they have to exercise their agency. Repertoires here refers to the political, economic, social, and religious resources that can be leveraged in order to cope with challenging realities. For example, men from the same religious minority may enjoy greater mobility on account of gender. They may be able to build up more social networks on account of being able to occupy certain spaces that are not seen as acceptable for women to be present in (youth clubs, for example).

Moreover, as many religious communities are also inherently patriarchal, men may be able to assume positions of leadership in that community that would not be acceptable for women to assume. This influences the ways in which poor women who belong to religious minorities can exercise their agency, and the kind of opportunities and vulnerabilities emanating from this. For example, in June 2016, in a market in Kato, Nigeria, 74-year-old Bridget Agbahime, a woman of Igbo origin who was also the wife of a pastor, was lynched by a mob in front of her store. Agbahime had asked a man who was performing ablutions in front of her store to leave so that she could trade. He accused her of blaspheming the Prophet Mohammed and incited the other traders to attack her, leading to her beheading in the market. While the perpetrators were arrested on the spot, five months later, all five were acquitted of their crimes (USCIRF 2017: 36).

The fact that men and women, Muslim and Christian (the latter the majority) have experienced violence to the point of death on charges of alleged blasphemy should not detract from how Bridget Agbahime's position made her vulnerable to being attacked. As a pastor's wife, her religious identity as a Christian in a majority Muslim northern state of Nigeria made her stand out. It was not an identity she could conceal even if she wanted to. Her identity as an Igbo from the southern part of Nigeria in a national context where Hausa–Igbo tensions run high would have also contributed to her vulnerability. Her

position was also affected by the intersection of her gender identity and economic status: she was in the market because she was engaging in income-generating activities to support her family.

The intention here is to make clear that her being lynched in the market is at least in part affected by the intersections of her identity which influenced her choices and where she was, what she was doing, and the kind of targeting she faced. Being a member of a religious and ethnic minority in a context in which hostilities against both identities run high made her especially vulnerable because she did not have the economic and social capital resources that would have allowed her to simply choose a less exposed way of earning a livelihood.

Perhaps where poor religiously and economically marginalised women experience particular vulnerabilities from which their middle-class and wealthy counterparts are to a certain extent insulated is with regard to how they can shield themselves from hostilities in public space. Middle and upper-class women can sometimes avoid spaces where there is communal violence by moving residence to other places. They can also, at the very least, use vehicles for transport instead of having to walk. Moreover, the skillset and social capital of middle-class and wealthy minority women may give them more choices in the kind of income-generating activities that are available to them. However, as Fatima Suleiman in the workshop noted, when women are poor and they belong to religious minorities, their dress is distinct from what the women who belong to the majority wear and they will stick out. With reference to Christian women in the north of Nigeria, Fatima noted that poor Christian women 'live in constant fear of being raped and abducted, and are blamed for this violence because of how they dress. However, this is compounded by the fact that their "dress" doesn't conform with the Islamic-influenced expectation that women cover their heads and faces.' This informs the need for advocacy, for women's voices to be amplified, both to strengthen responses to poverty alleviation and to improve education on minority rights and inclusivity in order to improve the position of minority women in Nigeria.

We also need to consider that poorer religious minority women may feel the need to avoid some income-generating opportunities because of a chill effect as a result of incidents like the Nigerian example cited above. Religious minority women's poverty may result from the fact that it is too unsafe for them to carry out certain types of work,

driving them towards lower paid opportunities which may be perceived as safer. Where an active 'religious otherisation' process is occurring, women who belong to religious minorities may find themselves with deeply confined opportunities.

Yet even with deeply circumscribed choices influenced by the intersection of poverty, religious minority status, and gender, women do exercise agency. Often women who belong to religious minorities and are poor may not assume formal leadership positions in the religious institutions that shape their lives because of the elitist and patriarchal hierarchy of these institutions. However, poor women who belong to religious minorities are not just victims; they exercise leadership in multiple forms and expressions. A case in point is the mass mobilisation of Indian Muslim women against the infamous citizenship law in India (see proposition five on details of the law). Hoda (2020, unpaginated) notes that since December 2019 when the protests began against the citizenship laws, we have seen 'the vanguard role played by women. This is their moment. This is their movement.' Hoda notes that while they are aware of their targeting as members of a Muslim community, by engaging in public mobilisation against the state, they are engaging in acts that simultaneously, even if not intentionally, constitute a rupture with the purdah expectations of the Muslim clergy.

Hoda (2020, unpaginated) notes:

That these women, as a collective, are in the lead, has irredeemably dented the Indian Muslim patriarchy. This may be the first time that they have dominated the public space in such a resounding manner. It is not only going to formalize the already modified gender equation within the family, but also to institutionalize new standards of propriety by displacing the Purdah prudery which kept in place a women-phobic discourse of piety and propriety.

Hoda's elucidation takes note of how in mobilising against the state, the acts themselves constitute forms of dissent against inhibitions to women's emancipation that may have long-lasting and unintended positive consequences on their exercise of leadership. From the images of protesting women, it is clear this is not a small cohort of elitist or middle-class women, but a large constituency cutting across class divides.

Moreover, women from religiously marginalised poor groups also exercise agency on certain occasions by joining other women in mobilising around common economic, social, or political interests. We hope the upcoming research will shed light on the

circumstances around which women from religious minorities join or refrain from participating in collective endeavours with members of other faiths or no faiths to claim rights.

4. Proposition Two: Political pawns and more

International and local actors have used women who belong to religious minorities as political pawns in power struggles and their bodies as the battlegrounds for the subjugation of religious communities at large.

Since at least the 1990s, there has been a growing recognition that in conflict contexts, women's bodies become a major battleground on which political and geostrategic struggles for domination and exercise of power are played out between different actors. The passing of the UN Resolution 1325 in 2000 is considered a ground-breaking recognition of the atrocities committed against women in contexts of war and violence (Tryggestad 2009). However, there are other ways in which the instrumentalisation of women to legitimise geostrategic and political ends are manifest. Abu-Lughod (2002, 2014) and Kandiyoti (2011) have written extensively about how the United States' justification of going to war in Afghanistan, which was premised on the liberation of Afghani women, was only a cover-up for geostrategic interests. The nature of policies implemented on the ground (Kandiyoti 2011) and the striking of the peace deal with the Taliban made such claims of women's liberation redundant. It is highly relevant that the current US president, Donald Trump, has signed a peace agreement with the very same Taliban whose gender ideology was one of the justifications given for waging war in the first place.

However, the instrumentalisation of women who belong to religious minorities by global actors has not been given the same recognition in feminist scholarship. In 2015, ISIS beheaded 20 Copts in Libya. In its widely publicised video, it claimed it was an act of revenge against the Coptic Church for allegedly holding in captivity Coptic women who had converted to Islam. In the video, ISIS promised to engage in further terrorist attacks on the 'crusaders' for retaining Muslim women 'Camilla and her sisters' against their will (Al Atrush and Abdallah 2015). While ISIS did not give the names of the women who had allegedly converted to Islam and were being held against their will, it was very likely referring to the highly publicised cases of two Coptic women whom Islamists in Egypt had claimed to have converted to Islam but were being forced to live as Christians.

Two of the women came out in recorded videos saying that they had not converted (Tadros 2013).

The local police verified that the women had not converted and wanted to continue being Copts; however, the Islamists in Egypt staged several protests insisting they wanted back 'their women' (*ibid*). Three years later, ISIS engaged in another terrorist act in Libya, justifying it in part as a holy war to reclaim their women – the Coptic women who had supposedly converted to Islam. The act of vendetta was claimed against the Coptic Orthodox Church – and all crusaders. It is difficult to determine the real target behind the act of terrorism – the beheading of 20 migrant workers from Egypt – whether it was against the Egyptian state, against a Christian church establishment, or more broadly to strike terror in the West, or all of these. However, the instrumentalisation of Coptic women as the pretext for murdering members of the same religious community (Coptic men) on foreign soil indicated that there is no geographic or time limit to the appropriation of the 'saving our women' card as a political basis for waging war.

Similarly, when Boko Haram insurgents abducted 276 schoolgirls from Chibok Secondary School, Borno State in north-east Nigeria in April 2014, they were also used as pawns as part of Boko Haram's broader struggles with the government. Aina *et al.* (2019: 25) note that 'the abducted girls also became pawns in high stakes political disputations, bargains, electoral campaigns and negotiations'. It is not unusual for militias and armed actors to kidnap women and use them as pawns for the release of soldiers captured by the government, but what is distinct here is that the actual targeting of the girls was very much influenced by the fact that the majority of the girls were poor Christians. Okoli and Nnaemeka Azom (2019) note that the schoolgirls were, in the minds of Boko Haram, war booty in the jihad against the infidels. A large contingent of those abducted were Christian women from the southern Borno State. A Human Rights Watch study (2014: 16–17) of the group's targeting also highlights the insurgents' targeting of Christians:

In several video messages posted on YouTube and sent to the media, Boko Haram's leadership made direct threats against Christians. These include a post in January 2012, in which the then-spokesperson issued an 'ultimatum' of three days for Christians to leave the North. In May 2014, Boko Haram's leader stated in another video, 'This is a war against Christians and democracy and their constitution, Allah says we should finish them when we get them.' Former United

Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, publicly expressed concern over Boko Haram's targeting of Christians.

Undoubtedly, the movement's violent strategies are not only driven by ideology; they are also driven by what Okoli and Nnaemeka Azom (2019: 1228) eloquently term 'tactical opportunism'. This entails seizing upon unexpected political opportunity in order to maximise leveraging power in its bargaining with its opponents, or for strengthening its own power base. Examples of the movement's use of tactical opportunism for securing concessions include the kidnapping of civil servants and their wives to use as bargaining chips to negotiate the release of militants captured by the government, and engaging in prisoner swaps to lure security forces into ambush (Iyi 2018: 269).

Muslim women and men who are perceived to not conform to the insurgents' code of morality (for example, in donning the veil in a particular way) have also been violently assaulted and sometimes killed as an expression of the movement's capacity to terrorise communities into conformity. Examples of the use of tactical opportunism to enhance the economic power base of the movement includes kidnappings by Boko Haram to extract ransom payments. Tactical opportunism is behind the kidnapping of poor Muslim boys to serve as child soldiers. The kidnappings of Christian girls themselves are also motivated by in part by the opportunism of trading them as chattel in markets (thereby raising income for the movement) as well as forced impregnation for breeding a new generation of jihadists and foot soldiers (Iyi 2018: 267), sowing terror into any opponents of the movement.

However, caution is needed so as not to assume that the exercise of tactical opportunism negates any role for ideology in the movement's strategies on the ground. The intersection of gender and religious marginality significantly enhanced the likelihood of being targeted as part of a pre-orchestrated plan. Moreover, there is evidence of differentiated treatment by those held in captivity according to their religious affiliation. For example, in February 2018, a faction of Boko Haram kidnapped 110 girls and one boy from the girls' school in Dapchi, a town in north-east Nigeria. The government engaged in backstage negotiations with the captors and in March 2018, all the girls were released from captivity, except one. Her peers said she had refused to say she had converted to Islam as was required of all of them and was therefore retained (Maclean 2018). Thus, even if tactical opportunism explains the indiscriminate targeting of women

on occasion, religious affiliation becomes the defining factor in determining the predicament of the kidnapped.

The use of the Burmese military of mass rape against the Rohingya women in the genocide of 2017 has been widely recognised as an instrument of oppression (Bowcott and Ratcliffe 2020). While the atrocities committed against the Muslim women of Rohingya are of exceptional brutality, women who belong to religious minorities living in other parts of the country have also been subject to systemic sexual violence for many decades. The Burmese military has been using sexual violence against women as a weapon of war against those who belong to ethnic/religious minorities in an organised and orchestrated manner. The Women's League of Burma (2004) notes:

Women and children continue to be raped, used as sex slaves, tortured and murdered across the country by the regime's armed forces and authorities. It is clear that the rapes and violence are not committed by rogue elements within the military but are central to the modus operandi of this regime. Structuralized and systematic human rights violations, including sexual violence, are an inevitable result of the regime's policies of military expansion and consolidation of control by all possible means over a disenfranchised civilian population (Women's League of Burma 2004).

The deployment of sexual violence as an instrument of the subjugation and terrorisation of Muslim and Christian women across the whole country was particularly prevalent where there is any concern for public expressions of dissidence against the status quo.

In instances where women are used as political pawns and their bodies as battlegrounds, it is also critically important to give recognition to how the intertwining of gender, class, caste, and religion plays out without negating or side-lining the religious dimension. In Pakistan, religious minorities being subsumed into lower castes has negative implications for women specifically. Gazdar's (2007) research explores how lower caste groups are considered to have no honour, meaning that there is nothing for a member of that group to lose if they are violated. Consequently, Gazdar's research documents cases across the whole country of women from *chuhra*, Scheduled Caste Hindu, and other lower caste communities being subjected to rape by well-known perpetrators who know they will not be prosecuted. Gazdar found that this violence and discrimination was also justified by negative racial attitudes, stemming from beliefs held by Afghan invader tribes

from the eleventh century, that women from lower castes were of 'black lineage' (Gazdar 2007).

A report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan on Forced Conversion noted that, particularly in the area of Sindh where poverty is extremely high, Hindu girls, especially if they are from the lower castes and come from struggling families, are susceptible to being kidnapped and forced to convert. Therefore, the term 'forced conversion' is deeply problematic in these contexts as it obscures processes under seemingly neutral legal terms. For example, families discover that their daughters are 'officially' married, but this obfuscates the fact that they were abducted, raped, and held in captivity. Families are told that their daughters have converted to Islam as a *fait accompli* but the conditions that they have endured and under which they have converted point to the urgency of holding to account all who were involved in this 'conversion'. They should be held accountable for being accomplices in the crimes of abduction, rape, and holding women in captivity.

Where families suffer from religious, economic, and social exclusion, the prospects of law and order being enforced to return their daughters becomes minimal. Moreover, the collusion of powerful actors at a local level in addition to legislation that prohibits conversion from Islam makes it difficult to retrieve women and girls who have been kidnapped. At a more profound level, families who have found the money to pay lawyers or have had civil society organisations' (CSO) support to challenge the abduction of their daughters in court, have found that their testimony is simply not believed when set against the testimony and majority faith-embedded narratives of powerful majority religious families with wide social connections in the judiciary and in local politics. The otherisation processes play out in the legal process, as *de facto* if not *de jure*, the imbalance in 'worth' between those of different religions affects the relative credibility of their testimony.

Other than the direct impact on the women and girls affected by the common occurrence of abduction, forced marriage, and forced conversion, these incidents have a hugely chilling effect on all women and girls in these communities. But the impacts are most felt in poor rural households where women and girls are not allowed to participate in events or opportunities outside of the home as a result of the threats against them. As part of the CREID project, when partners sought to run focus group discussions (FGDs)

with Hindu women, the community were very reluctant to allow women to join and participate. There is a view that simply being seen outside by other community members may put women at risk.

The impact is greatest on poor women as Hindu women who have access to private forms of transport can avoid both the risk and public gaze. This chilling effect clearly adds to poverty in families as women and girls may cease participating in education as a result of the threat. They may also decline work roles outside of the home. As the International Dalit Solidarity Network makes clear, being of Dalit origin means that they are especially vulnerable, but the ideological driver is what keeps them in a position of vulnerability and deters their ability to break out of it:

Dalit women of Pakistan fall victim to sexual abuse, abduction and forced religious conversion. Dalit women tell of kidnappings and abductions leading to forced conversion and marriage into Muslim families. The stories of the women's families reveal that religious conversion is a barrier to the return of women to their families and action by police personnel.²

The significance of the International Dalit Solidarity Network's analysis is that it shows how the intersection of gender, caste, and poverty exposes a particular cohort of women to sexual violence, but their virtual enslavement thereafter on account of having been forced into becoming subjugated Muslim subjects is what makes their liberation so difficult. As will be discussed in the next proposition, these women are being targeted on religious grounds, but one of the drivers is the advancement of a religiously homogenised population.

² <https://idsn.org/key-issues/dalit-women/dalit-women-in-pakistan/>.

5. Proposition Three: Ideologically motivated sexual grooming

While poor vulnerable girls and women have been the targets of sexual grooming with the intention of sexual predation, there is also an ideologically motivated grooming process aimed at the religious conversion of religious minority women.

Proposition three relates to the exercise of a subtle, coercive, and insidious form of power which is distinct from the overt, direct acts of violence entailed in proposition two. Contrary to the violent use of force described in proposition two (abduction, rape, forced impregnation, etc.), the phenomenon described here usually commences with soft, even positive expressions of power. At the outset, the lack of violence may even suggest a consensual relationship, thereby making it very difficult to unravel the predatory intentions. We interrogate below whether the nature of the relationships in question amount to sexual grooming, how the targeting of religious minority girls/women is distinct from the targeting of vulnerable girls more broadly in its motives, and how it is addressed.

Sexual grooming generally is a highly complex and understudied phenomenon. Grooming is about a very particular kind of power relationship which is 'often used as a means to prepare an individual or to place an individual into a position in which they are *unwittingly* subjected to *abusive* and/or *exploitative* behaviour' (Sinnamon 2017: 461–2, emphasis added). Sinnamon's choice of these three words represent some distinctive core dimensions of the operation of power in instances of grooming. The subject of the grooming is not conscious of the intent of the person whom she is engaging with, and hence the unwitting entanglement into a relationship that conceals its ulterior design.

The second and third words, *abusive* and *exploitative*, are indicative of the negative impact of the exercise of such power on the person being groomed, particularly with respect to 'sexually exploitative and abusive relationships' (2017: 460). What makes exploitation possible is that the subject being groomed is vulnerable. Vulnerability is often more straightforward to establish when the targets are children rather than adults. When a predator establishes a relationship with a minor, even if it appears consensual, there is a recognition that there is a deeply unequal power hierarchy because the person

groomed is underage. Moreover, in many countries, the law itself recognises the vulnerability of minors to child sexual exploitation even when consensual.

It is very difficult in conventional cases in adult sexual grooming to prove exploitation or abuse in the absence of violence for a number of reasons. First, when a subject being groomed enters unwittingly into a relationship, this may give the semblance of a consensual relationship. Second, when the subject is extremely vulnerable, she may not recognise that the harm she is experiencing is premised on exploitation and is actually abusive. In the literature, for example, on the grooming of underage children in the United Kingdom, there is an acknowledgement that the absence of use of brute force does not mean consent. In cases of grooming of underage girls in a number of ring cases in the UK, it was noted that initially the exercise of power over the victims was through emotional manipulation. This took the form of identifying the subjects' sources of vulnerability in terms of low self-esteem, poverty, neglect, etc.

From Sinnamon's analysis (2017: 462), it is possible to gauge two common features between child and adult sexual grooming: predators particularly target subjects who are vulnerable, and predation follows a pattern of 'emotional and psychological manipulation tactics'. Globally, we know that both children and women experiencing social and economic deprivation and those who have been made vulnerable on account of personal or family circumstances of all backgrounds can be vulnerable to sexual grooming by predators. In other words, this is a phenomenon not specific to women who belong to religious minorities.

Moreover, the presence of religious majority/minority dynamics in society does not by default automatically establish vulnerability and/or exploitation when women and men marry across religious divides. Even in patriarchal contexts where social norms and values entrench male privilege and domination, it does not necessarily signify *per se* that the relationship across the religious divides is informed by predation/exploitation or the absence of consent on the part of women (many women consensually enter into deeply patriarchal relations with or without religious difference for many different reasons). It is also understandable that in cases where women who belong to religious minorities defy the conventions of their communities and elope with men not from their religious communities, it could cost them their lives (if they are killed by their families on account of causing them shame). Hence, what distinguishes the targeting of poor women who

belong to religious minorities is neither the religious differentiation *per se* nor their poverty, but where these factors combined with others put them in a position of vulnerability.

What is specific about the sexual grooming of girls and women who belong to religious minorities is first its ideological intent and second, that the law protects such acts. Each will be elucidated below.

Ideologically motivated sexual grooming does not detract from its sexually exploitative and abusive nature but it does indicate an intent not just to harm the subject but also the religious community to which she belongs. What cases from Pakistan, Nigeria, Egypt, and India point to is that a constellation of factors suggests that there are incidents which suggest that women were not being engaged with as part of courting, but as part of ideologically motivated sexual grooming (sometimes of children and sometimes of adults). The ideological motivation is both for the subject herself and her community.

As with the general phenomenon of child/adult sexual grooming, often men will target women from religious minorities who are vulnerable on account of one or a combination of vulnerabilities such as economic (poverty and deprivation), social (exposure to domestic violence), or psychological (neglect, vilification). These factors do not all have to exist, but there is often a constellation of factors that create situations of vulnerability. However, what distinguishes sexual predation from ideologically motivated sexual grooming is the intention. The first is that there is a political project behind the targeting of women from religious minorities. Perhaps one of the most overt of such cases is from India, where in 2017 the Hindu Jagran Manch (HJM) announced that it would facilitate the marriage of around 2,100 Muslim women who wished to marry Hindu men and would also support them financially and provide security, according to *The Indian Express*. The HJM have openly declared that their intention is to promote the conversion of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism (Vandavelde 2011).

CREID's workshop participants from Nigeria and Egypt gave examples of Muslim men in Nigeria and Egypt being given money by government groups to marry Christian women. One participant from Nigeria explained how a Muslim woman recounted to a researcher that her husband was given money to 'win over' Christian women as wives so they could have children and grow the Muslim population while diminishing the Christian one. A participant from Egypt presented a similar situation, but with an emphasis on the fact

that the Muslim men were encouraged to target underaged girls and force them to marry for conversion purposes.

The intention in the cases of ideologically motivated grooming is both as a victory for the religious majority as well as the humiliation of the religious minority. On the victory for the religious community, the act of the 'acquiring' of the religious minority women is intended to symbolise the superiority of the religion of the majority. It is also intended to humiliate the religious minority by bringing about shame. Since women's bodies are the repositories of a community's honour, the loss of women is equated with the loss of honour. In some cases, the conversion of a woman is celebrated by parading her in her own original religious community in order to impress upon them that they have lost one of their own. It is interesting that in a field visit by the Pakistani Human Rights Commission, a local journalist noted the gender differential pertaining to conversion from Hinduism to Islam: 'When girls converted it was celebrated, but when Hindu boys converted they were forced into destitution' (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2019: 5).

The idea of organising processions in the streets that are largely dominated by members of the religious minority is an indication that the sexual grooming goes beyond the sexual predation of an individual, and that the intent of celebrating the conversions is not individual, but collective. When two women disappeared in the infamous case of Reena and Raveena, their brother Shaman Das Meghwar also disclosed that cases of conversion were frequently being celebrated through jubilant processions in Daharki to further harass and depress the Hindu community (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2019: 4).

The ideologically motivated nature of sexual grooming is intended psychologically and demographically to fulfil a broader political project, that of creating a religiously homogenised society. On a strategic level, the conversion of more women would mean less procreation of members of the religious minority and therefore a strategy of their demographic containment. In many of these contexts, the offspring by law are automatically considered born into the majority religion. In other words, this is different from sexual grooming, whether of children or adults, where the sexual predation is the goal in and of itself and where there is an absence of the advancement of a broader community-wide supremacist vision.

However, it is not just intent, but also the legal and social responses to the disappearance and conversion of girls and women that gives the sexual grooming of girls and women its distinct character. It is interesting that the literature on missing minority women rarely uses the word 'grooming' when talking about the disappearances. Grooming assumes a purposeful process, and in many communities where women who belong to religious minorities disappear, there is a reluctance to interrogate whether the woman disappeared of her own free accord. Activists from Pakistan and Egypt at the CREID workshop pointed out that often the police will not act in response to complaints from parents with respect to the disappearance of girls, even when they are underage. The police's reaction is that the person may have chosen to elope of her own free accord, and therefore it is not the remit of the police to search for her whereabouts.

This, according to the participants, emboldens those who have kidnapped the girls or have them in captivity to threaten families with more violence if they do not desist from searching for their daughters. Within the Hindu community in Pakistan, there have been instances where supporters of the kidnapper have threatened to capture more women if the family of the woman who disappeared insists on finding out the whereabouts of their daughter. In that sense, there is fear for a collective punishment of the religious minority if they pursue a case of tracking where their daughter is.

In the CREID workshop, Seema Maheshwary explained how in one case, parents didn't want to report to the police in case it made the kidnapper angry and another of their daughters was abducted. There is no expectation that the kidnappers will be found and justice served, especially if the family and community is poor. This is corroborated by the Pakistani Human Rights Commission report's field mission, which noted that:

Cases involving the Meghwar and Kohli communities tended to be reported as they were relatively better off financially, but virtually all the forced conversion cases of the Bhagri and Bheel communities went unreported (Pakistani Human Rights Commission 2019: 5).

The complicity of the police in taking no action creates a vicious cycle where gender, class, and religious affiliation are deeply entangled: a girl or young woman from a marginalised background becomes entrapped in a relationship after having been groomed. She disappears through kidnapping or seemingly out of her own free will. She is held captive. Her parents resort to the police who do not act. This becomes known to

the perpetrator and any group endorsing him, which further emboldens them to repeat their crime with other girls as well as to terrorise families into silence.

6. Proposition Four: The gender hierarchies within

A religious minority community's respect for gender equality significantly influences poor religious minority women's sense of their own power.

In the first proposition presented in this paper, it was argued that while the intersection of religious marginality, gender, and poverty intertwine to influence the status, position, and circumstances affecting women who belong to religious minorities, this does not negate the presence of agency exercised through a wide array of expressions of voice. However, the nature of the gender hierarchy within a religious minority also wields enormous power on the position of women who belong to religious minorities and their ability to exercise their agency, both positively and in ways that circumscribe and limit it. There is an adage that poor women who belong to religious minorities will face a triple whammy. This is not always so. A woman of limited economic means belonging to a despised religious minority does not necessarily or automatically experience a triple whammy of discrimination (gender, class, religious marginality) if the socio-religious (or ethno-religious) community accords them respect and equal power. It is expedient that in any community, be it religious or of no faith, social norms, values, practices, and ideas pertaining to the equality of women with men will directly influence women's empowerment.

The extent to which a community believes in gender equality is a core facet of an environment that is enabling for women to exercise their agency. It is also possible that women who belong to religious minorities who practise gender equality may be in a better situation than women who belong to religious majorities but where the gender hierarchy between men and women is more patriarchal, at least as far as their agency or level of empowerment is concerned. For example, Mosuo women are China's last surviving matriarchy, with an estimated population of around 40,000. In this instance, the socio-cultural foundations of gender equality have withstood the deeply patriarchal nature of Tibetan Buddhism. On the face of it, there seems to be a triple whammy at work. As followers of Tibetan Buddhism experience discrimination in a targeted way by the mainland Chinese authorities, they are living in conditions of limited economic resources and broader society in general is relatively patriarchal. Yet the gender

equitable hierarchy within the community has meant that women from the Mosuo community experience an enabling form of agency that does not fit into the idea of disempowered objects of a triple whammy of intersecting vulnerabilities.

Undeniably, the example of Mosuo women is exceptional since there are very, very few women who belong to religious minorities or majorities who live in matriarchal societies. But the same effect, at least extreme levels, can be seen in Christian communities in Pakistan, where patriarchy is still present but gender norms are somewhat less unequal than in either the majority Sunni peer families or in fact in any other religious minority peer families (e.g. Hindu, Sikh). The opposite may also be true, e.g. minority Muslim women in Myanmar may indeed suffer the triple whammy, whilst Christian minority women may not to the same extent. What the case study of Mosuo women does suggest is that the role of religious communities can be significant in shaping how power and powerlessness associated with intersecting inequalities is experienced.

In all of the case studies discussed in this paper, from northern Nigeria to Egypt, Pakistan to Myanmar, India to Iraq, women's belonging to religious communities plays a central role in their lives, even when it intertwines with ethnicity and other identifiers. One of the most critical factors that will influence the negotiating power of women who belong to religious minorities is how they experience and cope with assault, which lies in their communities' conception of honour. In all of the case studies discussed here, social and religious constructs explicitly or implicitly consider a woman's body as an embodiment of her own and her family's honour and her religious community's honour at large. Such embodied constructs of honour are prevalent in all of these broader societies and patriarchal societies more broadly. This serves to accentuate the entrenchment of fear of shame and dishonour by the woman, her family, and her religious community. First, the honour associated with their personal conduct in terms of gender norms of chastity and purity, and second, the honour associated with the image of their religious community as pious and dignified.

The idea that women's purity is a proxy for a community's honour is a conception so deeply intertwined in Myanmar that it means a denial of the right of Burmese Buddhist women to marry a non-Buddhist man (Crouch 2015). The fact that the same restrictions are not imposed on Burmese Buddhist men reflects the rationale that it is men who lead in patriarchal societies such as that of Myanmar. Yet this is paralleled for religious

minority women, where under the rubric of protecting women's honour, and therefore the honour of the community, men from the same community may seek to impose restrictions on women's mobility under the guise of protecting her from potential sexual assault. In the cases shared in the workshop convened by CREID, participants cited numerous examples of women and girls being denied access to education and the opportunity to work or partake in leisurely activities in the bid to protect them from potential assault. The restrictions may sometimes be very much based on a genuine need to address women's vulnerability in the absence of rule of law and safety. The outcomes are the perpetuation of gender unequal practices and a denial of rights, as evidenced by the International Dalit Solidarity Network's reference to religious minority women in Pakistan:

There are frequent reports that the victims are kidnapped and subjugated to physical and emotional abuse involving threats of violence. One unfortunate result of the parents' constant fear of their daughters being abducted, forcibly converted and married to those kidnappers, is that it persuades the parents to arrange early marriages for their girls sometimes in early teens, with the consequential results of early pregnancies, increased child mortality and poverty.³

In Egypt, where there have been incidents of young Coptic women being targets of ideologically motivated sexual grooming and/or kidnappings, sometimes families have responded to actual or rumoured cases of disappearances by removing the girls from education. The author has documented cases of young girls being removed from primary or secondary school by their fathers in the midst of a communal panic about the possibility that this may happen to their daughters too. It is very difficult to document the scale of this since in many cases, the parents' first reaction is to deny that this is what has driven them to remove their daughters from school out of fear of assault or kidnappings.

There are far-reaching implications for women whose communities' practice of religion is deeply informed by their day-to-day experience of feeling under threat. An environment gripped by fear, anxiety, and insecurity discourages women from reporting harm or danger without worrying about the ramifications for themselves, their families, and more

³ <https://idsn.org/idsn-highlights-rights-violations-against-dalits-at-the-un-committee-on-discrimination-against-women-review-of-pakistan/>.

broadly, the state of communal peace. It is interesting that such an environment can increase vulnerability to sexual predation. Speaking broadly (rather than specifically to religious minorities), Sinnamon notes:

Religion is a cultural factor well known to be used by predators to manipulate their victims. Submission to authority, gender-based roles, rights, and responsibilities, and fear of consequences if these religious 'rules' are not adhered to, are powerful mechanisms that predators use to manipulate, exploit, and control their victims. Once the abuse has commenced, these same factors can be used to instil fear into the victim as a means of maintaining the relationship and ensuring silence. A victim may fear being judged by others within the religious group, being ostracised from the congregation or other religious social network, and may feel extreme shame and guilt over the sexual acts they have committed with the predator, seeing themselves as sinful and deviant. These are all factors the predator is able to reinforce in order to control the victim (2017: 471).

A vicious cycle is set in motion: in the incidence that a girl or woman becomes unwittingly involved in a relationship with a sexual predator, she feels too guilty, ashamed, and scared to seek help, the person grooming her exploits her sense of incapacitation to keep her in silence and subjugation, which in turn makes her become more entrenched in situations from which it seems impossible to exit.

Where women have had the courage to break out of such experiences of ideologically motivated grooming, or when they have been rescued from their kidnappers, how the communities receive the returnees has a critical impact on the women themselves as well as their families. Participants in the workshop spoke with deep pain about how their own communities' shunning of women who have been kidnapped and sexually assaulted had devastated survivors' hope of healing and restorative justice.

In Nigeria, Hajja Fatima Suleiman notes how it is common for girls and women returning to their communities after being subjected to abduction and violence by extremist groups, because of their religious affiliation, to be rejected, as the girls and women are seen as having changed their ideology. Many of these returnees were forced to don Islamic attire, and show subjugation to their kidnappers and compliance with their doctrinal precepts. In incidences where survivors were detained in captivity for a long

time or were returning with children, they were treated like 'damaged goods' that no one wants.

One participant at the workshop from a Yazidi background in Iraq spoke of the enduring psychological and physical effects Yazidi women are still experiencing from ISIS' rape and slavery in Iraq. Tragically, even in those incidents where the Yazidi people have returned to their original farms and homes, this has not been possible for many of the Yazidi women who were victims of ISIS atrocities. Many of them remain, to this day, in internally displaced people (IDP) camps as they are too scared that they would be rejected and shunned by their families on account of symbolising the loss of community honour. Similarly, for Iraq's Turkmen Shia women, some of whom were also kidnapped and sexually assaulted, the leadership of the Turkmen Shia community's response of denial of its occurrence and shunning survivors has not only meant psychological devastation and displacement but also denial of the opportunities of seeking restorative justice altogether.

The participant from the Turkmen Shia group in Iraq at our CREID workshop, Heman Ramzi, noted that because the Papa, the spiritual leadership of the Yazidi community, acknowledged the suffering of Yazidi women and pressed members to embrace them (even though it did not happen consistently), it was possible to make the legal case in relation to the UN and the Iraqi government for legal recognition (for Yazidis as victims of genocide) and obtain financial compensation and psychological support. Heman Ramzi explained that because the Turkmen Shia leadership did not acknowledge women's experiences, they were denied any opportunities of restorative justice that some of the Yazidi women were accorded.

While a religious community's methods of appropriating honour plays a central role in the positioning of women, other features of its ideology are also critical, in particular regarding demography and reproductive health. It is undeniable that the smaller numerically a marginalised religious minority is, the more it feels the weight of encroachment on it. How it responds to this demographic reality is critical for the status and situation of women from within this religious minority. In gender and development literature, it has been known that the greater the pressure on women to conceive more children, in particular in the context of extreme gender inequalities and the absence of good quality reproductive health-care systems, the more likely that women's wellbeing

will be seriously compromised (CREID 2019). This is particularly exacerbated where religious ideology is not affirming women's rights to bodily choice and where religion is appropriated to endorse the demographic aspirations of a community.

One of the participants at the workshop spoke at length about how some Coptic priests' encouragement of women to have more and more children is driven by a desire to avoid the shrinking of the Coptic population in Egypt, using religious rhetoric to do so by continuously emphasising that 'children are a gift from God' (and therefore who would want to deny God's gifts?). This is particularly propagated given the high immigration rates and the lower birth rates among the Coptic community in Egypt (Egyptian participant in the CREID workshop, anonymised). It incidentally goes against another part of the Coptic Orthodox Church (the developmental arm) which strongly advocates and funds initiatives intended to enhance women's reproductive rights and access to contraceptives.

Participants from Myanmar also noted that the religious leaders encourage women from their communities to have more children, on the same account, namely in response to the demographic reality of living in a majority Buddhist society. They note that the rhetoric puts so much pressure on women to have more children that it almost makes women feel that they are responsible for the future survival of their community and indeed their faith. Again, participants noted that there are incongruences. While some faith leaders speak about the importance of women's status being elevated in their community (and how the woman is the cornerstone of the community), on critical issues of social justice that are specific to women's equality (economic opportunities, access to education and health care), they fall silent (CREID 2019). This is also relevant to cases where assault and aggression is from within/perpetrated by members of one's own religious community; for example, incidences of domestic violence or sexual assault (see proposition five below) where the inclination on the part of the leadership is to seek conciliation rather than accountability.

It is important, however, in weighing the impact of this proposition and the one to follow, not to equate harm done by patriarchal, elitist, and gerontocratic ideologies and practices where they exist within religious communities with the harm incurred from broader policies of religious homogenisation and encroachment witnessed and experienced from the religious majority in society and a state that enforces policies that

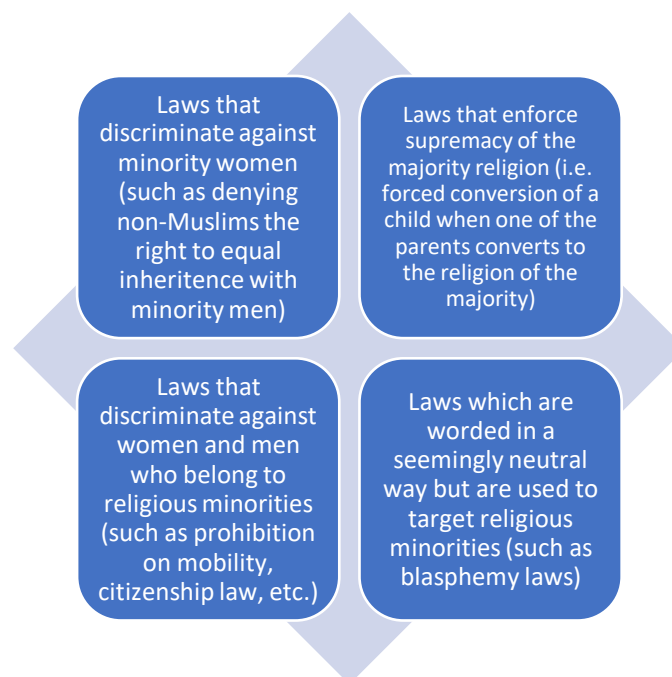
entrench religious supremacy. For example, the absence of progressive domestic violence policies within a religious minority is devastating, but it exists along a spectrum where ideologically motivated sexual grooming, sexual captivity, and enslavement are at the other end. This is a theme that empirical case studies will endeavour to unravel in greater depth in the next phase of CREID's research.

7. Proposition Five: The law as an instrument of subjugation

The legal domain can discriminate against women who belong to religious minorities in direct and indirect ways, and where economic vulnerability accentuates the experience of marginalisation by the law.

The legal domain can be discriminatory in its content or in its enforcement in ways that disproportionately negatively affect religiously marginalised poor women. This discrimination is distinct from what is experienced by the broader population of poor women or in relation to men who belong to religious minorities. The law and the legal domain have long been a site for systemic prejudice against women, the poor, minorities, and indigenous peoples (Petersen 2020; Ghanea 2018). However, we are proposing four ways in which this has played out legally for women from religious minority backgrounds:

Figure 1: Ways in which legal discrimination affects women from religious minorities



(1) Laws that do not allow religious minorities to implement their own religious provisions

The application of national legislation to religious minority communities in a manner that is incongruent with their own religious precepts can lead to the denial of equal rights of

religious minority women in relation to their male counterparts. The exclusion of equal inheritance clauses for women who belong to religious minorities in many Muslim-majority contexts where Shariah law has been applied is significant in its impact of allowing discrimination in the economic sphere. In many countries, there are domains in which religious minorities have their own laws and/or courts. Often, where religious minorities have their own system of legal governance is in the area of family law. What is meant by family law is deeply contextual; it can be limited to matters pertaining to marriage, divorce, and custody of children, or it can involve a broader interpretation covering inheritance, adoption, and other matters.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, where there is a decentralised system of governance, Christian women stand to gain in the area of inheritance compared to non-Christian women in the same region, as the personal status law grants them an equal share of inheritance to men (not surprisingly, on account of patriarchal gender hierarchies, this law is not consistently applied within the Christian community). Conversely, in the rest of Iraq and in Egypt, where Shariah law is enforced for majorities and minorities in the area of inheritance, Christian women are negatively affected by not being governed by their own inheritance law.

While the discrimination discussed in the above case study emanates from the denial of the enforcement of the religious communities' own religious precepts, the reverse can also occur, namely the very enforcement of the religious communities' own precepts can discriminate against women who belong to religious minorities. As per Shaheed's report (2020: 5):

In the case of Sri Lanka's Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act which, unlike national legal provisions for non-Muslim women, does not identify a minimum age requirement or require a woman to consent to marriage; leaving Muslim women and girls unprotected by national provisions.

The application of discriminatory laws against women who belong to religious minorities is in no small part on account of the highly conservative interpretations that are chosen by the male leadership in the community, whose interests it is to maintain patriarchal power.

(2) Laws which enforce supremacy of the religion of the majority

There are laws where supremacy of the religion of the majority trumps all other considerations, including gender hierarchies, to the detriment of women but also men who belong to religious minorities.

One of the most prevailing myths that has been perpetuated throughout history is that as long as religious minorities are accorded their own right to their own religious laws in family matters, then there are two parallel and equal systems of governance in operation (see Tadros 2009 for the limitations associated with parallel family law). However, this idea of two mutually bounded systems of law is premised on the assumption that women and men will not intermarry or convert. It is this space in-between the two sets of legislations that govern the majority and minorities where there is significant discrimination and denial of freedom of choice.

In Egypt, Iraq, and in most Muslim-majority countries where Shariah law applies, in the event that a couple from the same religious minority community (for example, Christians or Yazidis) marry, they follow the personal status law of their religious community. However, in the event that one of the spouses converts to Islam, irrespective of whether it is the woman or the man, any children become automatically considered Muslim, even if it is against the will of the child. This is a classic case where the enforcement of the law of the religious majority trumps patriarchy. In conventional patriarchal legal systems, the rights of men are usually privileged over those of women. However, in this case, should a woman convert to Islam, her children by default follow her religion, even if it is against the wishes of the father.

Another powerful example of where the law is deployed to privilege the religion of the majority above all other considerations is in Myanmar. In Myanmar, the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage Law, passed in 2015 (which has its historical roots in legislation dating back at least half a century), prohibits a marriage between a foreign man and a Burmese woman unless the man is a Buddhist. Crouch notes that 'this appears to be based on the common presumption that a "foreign man" means a Muslim man, and a Burmese woman means a "Burmese Buddhist woman"' (2015: 4).

On the face of it, this was intended to protect Burmese Buddhist women's rights insofar as Muslims in Burma have their own personal status law in accordance with their own interpretation of religion, which denies women equal inheritance rights and privileges

men in rights to divorce and child custody. However, it is intended to apply the constitutional clause that accords Buddhism a special position and does so by restricting Buddhist women's freedom to marry whomever they wish. Since Myanmar is a country with a wide array of religious minorities which includes Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Animists, the legislation was intended to inhibit Burmese women from marrying into other religions.

In both the cases presented above, it is clear that the law does not specifically discriminate against religious minority women; however, the overall legal climate of according a privileged position to the religion of the majority sends out very strong signals about the hierarchy of religions. Certainly, where the husbands of religious minority women do convert to Islam in the first example given, they will automatically be discriminated against by the legislative system in terms of being able to continue to raise their children according to their own faith.

(3) Laws which are discriminatory towards religious minorities generally but have a gender-specific impact (indirect discriminatory effect) in their implementation

A most recent example of the instatement of religiously prejudicial legislation that targets members of a religious community but whose negative impact disproportionately affects women is the issuance of the new citizenship law for Muslims in India. On 12 December, 2019:

The Indian government had passed a law that fast-tracked citizenship for non-Muslim refugees from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Pakistan who moved to India before 2015. The new law, which essentially made it more difficult for Muslim refugees to claim citizenship, was just the latest move by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to determine who was or wasn't Indian. And it came just months after the Narendra Modi-led government renewed a National Register of Citizens (NRC) to identify immigrants living illegally in the state of Assam, promising to soon implement it across the country (Bhowmick 2020, unpaginated).

Under the NRC process, people are required to submit documents proving their ownership of land, their lineage, and their education. Most women in India do not have their names on those kinds of documents. Kavita Krishnan, a gender activist and secretary of the All India Progressive Women's Association notes that: 'women in this

country have the vaguest ideas about when they were born or where they were born' and that 'the required documents are simply non-existent'. While the law was not written in a gender-specific way in its discrimination against women, the reality on the ground meant that they were disproportionately affected in demonstrating their eligibility to meet the Indian government's criteria for citizenship.

Nilanjana Bhowmick notes that after the implementation of the NRC in Assam in the northeast of India, from 'among 1.9 million people who were found to be lacking papers for applying for citizenship, 69 per cent of them were women' (2020, unpaginated). She notes that in such contexts, it is likely that among the 69 per cent of the targeted populations lacking in papers, a significant number of them would be the Muslim women who also happen to be economically excluded or marginalised.

(4) Laws which are not targeting religious minorities directly in their wording but which are enforced in a selective discriminatory manner

USCIRF's comprehensive review of blasphemy laws notes that in most cases, the actual wording of the law is intended to protect one religion but does not in its content specify particular religious minorities: 'The language in many of these laws is seemingly neutral with regard to religious belief and practice' (USCIRF 2017: 24). The infamous blasphemy laws implemented in Myanmar, northern Nigeria, Pakistan, and Egypt are such examples. What is being suggested here is that context is the most important determinant of how a neutrally worded blasphemy law is applied.

The USCIRF report (2017: 29) notes:

Laws do not operate in a vacuum devoid of political, judicial, and social contexts. In the case of blasphemy laws, implementation can vary significantly, depending on a range of considerations that include a state's political landscape, governing structures, law-enforcement capabilities, judicial culture, socio-historical relationship to religion(s), and pattern of responses to violence, as well as public attitudes about blasphemy and blasphemy laws. In some cases, states proactively prosecute individuals for transgressing blasphemy laws. In other cases, the laws are rarely enforced, if at all. [...] However, evaluating the plain language of the law cannot quantify the scope or intensity of the abuses that may occur in practice.

Blasphemy laws are renowned globally to disproportionately affect religious minorities or those of no faith (in terms of in comparison to the percentage of their population). They also disproportionately affect free thinkers and members of the intelligentsia who often by virtue of their profession happen not to be from the most economically marginalised poor. However, there are also incidents where the intersection of religious affiliation, gender, and poverty serve to accentuate the vulnerability of the individual to be the object of a witch hunt.

In Pakistan, one of two countries with the most pernicious application of the blasphemy law according to the USCIRF assessment (2017), this becomes particularly evident in the case of Asia Bibi. Asia Bibi was a former labourer from an economically and socially excluded class, who also happened to be Christian. When in 2010 she was working in the fields and drank from a cup that Muslims use to drink (and by default was seen to have polluted the cup) this raised the ire of some members of the Muslim community, who accused her of blasphemy against the prophet Muhammed. She was sentenced and spent eight years on death row before being acquitted in 2019. The insinuation here is not that where people have been tried on blasphemy allegations, these are all likely to have been driven by the intertwining of poverty, gender, caste, and religious affiliation. Rather, it is to say that there are incidences, such as the cases of Asia Bibi and Bridget Agbahime (mentioned in proposition one) where their positioning in environments that are already communally charged against religious minorities made it easy to target them.

On account of limitations of space, it is not possible to engage with the subtle nuances under each of these sub-propositions. However, it is important to note that the law does not treat all religious minorities in the same way. In most of the countries mentioned in this paper, there is a differential treatment of religious minorities in the law. For example, the infamous citizenship law passed in India does not apply to Christians and other religious minorities but only to Muslims. In Egypt, the recognition of the rights of the Abrahamic religions to be represented in their identity cards is not accorded to people of the Baha'i faith. In Pakistan, the position of Ahmadis is considerably more vulnerable than Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, or Shias due to the directly discriminatory legal provisions adopted which target them.

8. The governmentality of invisible targeting of women who belong to religious minorities

The above propositions each tell a story of a constellation of factors influencing the nature of targeting, the factors that accentuate vulnerability to targeting, and the agential dimension of how women experience and cope with them. However, these propositions are also deeply intertwined, and while not linear nor straightforward, they are informed by broader underpinning power dynamics. In this section, we seek to explain how these propositions interact with each other through the concept of governmentality and exploring the drivers behind such targeting. Governmentality is used here in the Foucauldian meaning of the word to refer to how power is exercised in pervasive ways to create systems of control and domination. In the context of this inquiry, it refers to how in any given context, the dynamic interaction of a combination of the propositions that we have presented above serves to create religious hierarchies that reflect and engender religious otherisation and promote oppressive religious homogenisation.

At the heart of governmentality of religious otherisation is an ideology of religious supremacy. The control of women who belong to the religious 'other' is a key means through which religious homogenisation is pursued. This ideology can be advanced through state or non-state actors or a collusion of the two. It can manifest itself through foreign policy, political economy, social norms and beliefs, or combinations thereof. Actors who are promoting policies and practices of religious supremacy in contexts where populations are religiously diverse may pursue one or more forms of religious homogenisation. Sometimes, they may attempt to violently eliminate the presence of religious minorities (as we saw in Myanmar, India, northern Nigeria, and Iraq), or they may adopt policies of containment and subjugation that over long periods of time create 'ceilings' that religious minorities dare not contest or challenge (such as in Pakistan, Egypt, and India). In all such cases, it is often a combination of political, economic, social and religious policies, formal and informal, that allow for this governmentality of religious minorities.

Religious otherisation occurs as a process and as an outcome. This does not mean that it is the only process occurring, or it is the only driver with explanatory power for complex situations on the ground. Tactical opportunism colludes with religious otherisation in multiple ways. Political economy drivers sometimes serve the same ends (religious otherisation) or sometimes they serve completely different ends; for example, using religious minorities as pawns for achieving other objectives. The meta-narrative emerging here is around the governmentality of religious homogenisation processes and the exercise of power to strengthen religious hierarchies.

Religious supremacy colludes with highly reactionary political ideologies. Such an interface is manifest, for example, in the militaristic ultra-nationalistic ideology of the army in Myanmar. The mass rape and sexual violence used against the Rohingya women was politically orchestrated and mediated as part of a wider plan to annihilate and destroy the entire community.

The second dimension of governmentality of religious supremacy is the interface between formal and informal sites of power that enable the targeting of religious minority women. For example, ideologically motivated sexual grooming operates informally in Pakistan (there is no formal institution or policy that officially endorses the grooming of Hindu girls). However, the informal processes of the ideologically motivated sexual grooming of girls are facilitated through the formal exercise of the legal framework which enables the conversion into the dominant religion, disregards the prerequisite evidence of such a conversion being made freely, and punishes those who convert from it.

Moreover, a law that accords the child the dominant religion if one of his parents belong to it is one that enforces religious supremacy. This is in operation with informal forms of exercise of power such as when mobs threaten and exercise violence, while benefiting from a culture of impunity. What enables such an interface, which represents the third dimension of governmentality, is the targeting of those who are experiencing multiple intersecting vulnerabilities. This explains the targeting of women who belong to religious minorities who are from poor, socially excluded, marginalised communities. Perpetrators are emboldened to act not only by virtue of an enabling legal system and informal mechanisms, but also because of the socioeconomic vulnerability of these women.

The third dimension of governmentality is the gender ideology of the nation and the religious minority in relation to embodied conceptions of honour. The idea of the protection/violation of a woman's body being the proxy for family, tribal, community, and indeed a nation's honour has been amply addressed in feminist post-colonialist scholarship. In this inquiry, women's bodies have been appropriated to symbolise the honour of religion itself. The dishonouring of the body of a woman from a religious minority is an exhibition of superiority, and indeed, conquest, by the religious majority.

The appropriation of women's bodies as pawns in power struggles is deeply political, achieving both strategic and tactical ends. For religious minorities, all kinds of restrictions are placed on women, ranging from mobility, education, and visibility to justify the protection of the honour of the community, and the religion it follows. This can manifest itself in intensely patriarchal expressions of hypermasculinity among the religious majority and minority, as women's bodies become battlegrounds, in the name of the sacred.

It also manifests itself in the legal domain as well – with laws to ensure that women who belong to the religious majority are 'protected' from 'dishonourable' partners and men from the religious minority do not dare to dishonour the women from the majority. This puts an enormous burden on women who belong to religious minorities, because if they hold to account powerholders from their own religious backgrounds, they are made to feel that they are traitors. They are made to feel that they are not only putting the honour of their religious communities under fire, but if there is intervention on their behalf, this may become the trigger for communal violence.

Another key dimension of governmentality which enables the interface of the formal and informal in how targeting of religious minority women occurs is the insidious power of silence. With the exception of genocides (Iraq, Myanmar), the intersections of religious marginality, poverty, and gender as they affect women from religious backgrounds is conventionally overlooked. What explains this silence is a number of factors. First, the complex, multifaceted dimensions of conflict are not fully recognised. In some cases, the political appropriation of ethnicity is recognised as a driver of conflict, but its overlap with the religious dimension is overlooked. Sometimes the fault-lines are close enough, but other times they are not at all. Conflating the two and downgrading or ignoring

either one does a disservice to being able to understand what is going on in a situation of conflict or oppression.

The creation of a culture of denial around the targeting of women who belong to religious minorities and experience socioeconomic vulnerabilities is the assumption that if women are being targeted on account of tactical opportunism, this negates religiously motivated targeting. For example, it has been established that ISIS have found the sex trafficking of captured Yazidi women to be a lucrative business and there are clear economic benefits from their perspective from their involvement in such practices. Yet the economic benefits of these practices should not detract from the fact that the targeting of Yazidi women in the first place was ideologically driven.

Another factor that contributes to the negation of the targeting of religious minority women is the confounding of lack of force/violence with consent. For example, in cases of ideologically motivated sexual grooming, because women seem to willingly enter into relationships with predators who have a cover of caring men, there is a reluctance to address the underlying intent, power dynamics, context, and outcomes of such relationships.

Finally, a major contributing factor to the sustenance of silence around the experiences of women who are from religious minority backgrounds is the absence of systematic data on the prevalence, patterns, long-term implications, and outcomes of their targeting. Part of the reason is the sheer terror experienced by poor families of the consequences of disclosure for themselves and their entire communities, which leads to concealing the dynamics of discrimination or denying them altogether. Another is the focus of some research on incidences of exceptional violence as opposed to day-to-day experiences of encroachment. It is this gap that CREID's forthcoming research endeavours to address.

Conclusions

Women who are from a religious minority background are not necessarily acutely vulnerable if they have political and economic power and their communities have progressive gender ideologies. As mentioned in the introduction, the intention here is not to suggest that all poor women who are members of religious minorities are targeted in a worse way than all other people. The intention is not to create a hierarchy of who suffers the most. The intention it is to make visible the invisible experiences and forms of targeting that are associated with the nexus of religious marginality, gender, and class. The intertwining of these forms of inequality are critical in contexts of religious otherisation because on the one hand, they expose these women to particular forms of vulnerability that are distinct from other poor women who do not belong to religious minorities, and on the other hand, they expose these women to specific gender-based forms of violations that male members of religious minorities may not experience.

Being targets of discrimination and encroachment does not mean a lack of exercise of agency, as we saw with the collective mobilisation by Muslim women against the citizenship law more recently in India. In the next phase of the research to be undertaken by the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, we will engage with women who are situated within these complex power dynamics in order to understand their perspectives, interpretive lens, and the ways of representing subjectivities in relation to different interlocutors. This will be undertaken by women who are from these communities and whose own positionality is one that is considered, in the eyes of the women themselves, legitimate. In view of the substantial diversity within the women in each of the different contexts in which CREID works, the intention is to understand the dynamics at hand rather than to arrive at common denominators.

Under each of these propositions, glaring gaps have emerged in our understanding of very complex processes that are very difficult to trace and unpack. For example, there is a severe deficit in our understanding of how ideologically motivated sexual grooming occurs. How do sexual predators win the trust of these women? How do the latter manage to keep it secret when they are under such heavy surveillance from their families? How does psychological entrapment happen?

The propositions presented in this paper cumulatively represent the starting point of an iterative process of framing, data gathering, and validation, and a continued revisiting of our assumptions. Through the interpretive lens and work of women and men from within these communities, we will endeavour to go beyond the visible forms of power. The granular understanding of processes and impact will undoubtedly expose more gaps in our knowledge, unearth more unanswered questions, and challenge us to rethink our methodological approaches as well as our assumptions.

Whilst our knowledge remains incomplete, this does not prevent us from acting on the knowledge and insights that we gather as we unravel the complexity, nuance, depth, and scope of the targeting that poor women from religious minority backgrounds have experienced. This is not to deny their agency, nor to deny that others also suffer, but to make visible these recurring patterns of inequality, and to recognise the role of religious marginality which informs them.

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