Discrimination, Marginalisation and Targeting of Ahmadi Muslim Women in Pakistan

Ahmadi Muslims are criminalised for practising their faith in Pakistan which has resulted in widespread discrimination and continuous, sporadic acts of violence leading many to flee their cities or their country altogether. This is not always an option for those who are poor and socioeconomically excluded. A recent study into the experiences and issues faced by socioeconomically excluded women from the Ahmadiyya Muslim community has found that Ahmadi Muslim women in particular are marginalised, targeted, and discriminated against in all aspects of their lives, including in their lack of access to education and jobs, their inability to fully carry out their religious customs, day-to-day harassment, and violence and lack of representation in decision-making spaces.

Key messages

- It is a criminal offence in Pakistan for Ahmadi Muslims to express their views and to talk about their religious beliefs in public.
- Ahmadi Muslim women have no access to their mosques and cannot carry out peaceful religious activities, including prayer or celebrating important occasions on their religious calendar.
- Ahmadi Muslim women face additional threats to men, being easily identifiable from their dress and facing harassment as a result.
- Ahmadi Muslim women also have more limited educational opportunities: faced with insults, hatred and physical threats, their families restrict them from attending education institutions.

Context

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community (AMC, or Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at) believe themselves to be Muslims. The AMC was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in 1889 as a revival movement within Islam. Unlike all other sects of Islam, the AMC believes that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was the promised Messiah prophesied by the prophet Muhammad. Other sects, however, believe that the promised Messiah is yet to come and, therefore, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad is a false prophet and his followers are non-Muslims. Global membership of the AMC exceeds tens of millions, with followers in more than 200 countries.

In Pakistan, there are an estimated half a million to 4 million Ahmadis (figures are uncertain since, fearing for their safety, not all Ahmadi Muslims disclose their faith). They live primarily in the city of Rabwah (now officially known as Chenab Nagar). The AMC has faced persecution in Pakistan since the country's inception in 1947, intensifying in 1953 when around 200 Ahmadi Muslims were killed in anti-Ahmadiyya Lahore riots. In 1974, Ahmadis were officially declared non-Muslim under the leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto; whilst in 1984, President Zia ul Haq issued Ordinance XX, which provides for imprisonment extending to three years and unlimited fines to any AM who, in any way, behaves like a Muslim or refers to him/herself as a Muslim. Since Ahmadi Muslims consider themselves to be Muslims, they also do not have access to any special legal provisions made for religious minorities in Pakistan.

“Ahmadi Muslim women in particular are marginalised, targeted and discriminated against in all aspects of their lives”

Methodology Note

Research location

Since it is a criminal offence in Pakistan for Ahmadi Muslims (AM) to express their views and to talk about their religious beliefs in public, this research took place in Thailand with a group of Ahmadi Muslims who have fled Pakistan, and registered as

refugees with UNHCR. Participants were asked to reflect on the issues facing poor AM women in Pakistan and how they might differ from those faced by: more affluent AM women, Muslim women from other sects of Islam, and AM men.

Focus Group Discussions using participatory ranking

The research was carried out through focus group discussions (FGDs) with economically excluded Ahmadi Muslim (AM) women and men using open-ended questions and participatory ranking. Participatory ranking enables participants themselves to identify problems and challenges, and rank these in order of their preference/priority. Three FGDs were held with 30 participants in total (one FGD with ten AM women over the age of 35, one with ten AM women aged 18–34 years, and one with ten AM men). Rich qualitative data was gathered through open-ended discussions, however the starting point for these discussions was a semi-structured questionnaire based

on a list of issues and supplementary questions generated during a pilot study informed by conversations with five members of the national executive body of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jam'at in Thailand who interact regularly with members of the Ahmadiyya Muslim community and were therefore well-placed to shape the research questions prior to the main study. This mixed methods approach, using both quantitative ranking and qualitative data from the questionnaires and supplementary questions, meant that data could be triangulated and participants had the opportunity to shed light on the issues through their own words and experiences.

Researcher from the same community as participants

The lead researcher/facilitator who undertook the data collection is a follower of the Ahmadiyya Muslim faith and occupies a leadership position within the Ahmadiyya Muslim community in Thailand. He had to leave

Pakistan on account of the day-to-day encroachments experienced there. He also sought the assistance of Ahmadiyya Muslim women in outreach and in undertaking the focus groups.

Key findings

Twenty-five key issues were identified by participants and ranked in order of severity, starting from the most severe and widespread. All participants agreed on the top three threats which all related to a lack of freedom to carry out their religious activities and customs:

1. They can be arrested due to Ordinance XX of the Pakistani constitution, which prohibits Ahmadi people from carrying out Muslim customs;
2. They have no access to their mosques and cannot carry out peaceful religious activities, such as prayer and worship;
3. They are unable to mark important occasions freely within their religious calendar.

Following this initial agreement, it became clear that as the issues were ranked further AM women and men saw the reality of the threats facing AM women differently. The issues with the biggest divergences in ranking, where AM women saw the issue as more of a threat to them than AM men did, included:

1. Difficulties in gaining admission to educational institutes, followed by constant harassment if they did manage to obtain entry;
2. The fact that violence against AM women is never highlighted in the Pakistani media; and
3. Being unable to dress in the way they want to without experiencing harassment.

The issue of education was hugely significant to AM women. They described how local schools deny them admission due to pressure from local clerics on account of not wishing to have AM children amongst them. Where some schools offer admission, they do not take any responsibility for the safety and rights of the Ahmadi students at their institutes. Ahmadi students face hatred, insults and are physically beaten by from both teachers and fellow students. Consequently, young AM women are restricted by their parents from attending educational institutes where they would study alongside non-Ahmadis; and this severely limits the quality of their education and access to further opportunities, further locking them into socioeconomic exclusion.

The fact that violence against AM women is never highlighted in the Pakistani media was in the top ten threats ranked by AM women, and this was compounded by the fact that the media actively gives time and space to those who openly speak out against the AMC. This contributes to the hate aimed at AM women within society. Additionally, the distinctive way in which AM women wear their veil [covering head, face and full body with the exception of hands] – sometimes as an act of defiance – does make them stand out in public compared to the dress worn by Muslim women from other Islamic sects in Pakistan. This makes them easily identifiable as Ahmadi and consequently vulnerable to experiencing extensive harassment while walking the streets, something which the participants claimed the police ignore.

“Ordinance XX... provides for imprisonment extending to three years and unlimited fines to any [Ahmadi Muslim] who, in any way, behaves like a Muslim or refers to him/herself as a Muslim”

Across many of the issues was the acknowledgement that AM women could face more opportunities, especially in relation to quotas set up for religious minorities, if they declared themselves as belonging to a religious minority on their National Identification card. Doing this, however, would mean accepting a status that describes them as ‘non-Muslim’, something which would amount to a betrayal of their religious identity since they believe themselves to be Muslims. To increase their chances of getting employment and out of fear of violence against them, AM individuals often change their religious status from ‘Ahmadiyya’ to ‘Islam’ on their National Identification card, which carries significant risk for them, including imprisonment.

“AM women could face more opportunities... if they declared themselves as belonging to a religious minority... [but] this would mean accepting a status that describes them as ‘non-Muslim’, something which would amount to a betrayal of their religious identity”

Policy recommendations

The following recommendations aim to address the marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion faced by Ahmadi Muslim women in Pakistan. They are drawn from this study and the researcher’s own background as an Ahmadi Muslim who has fled persecution in Pakistan:

- The government of Pakistan must end institutionalised violence and discrimination against AMC, including by revoking unjust laws, countering extremism, and giving AMC their due human and religious rights, as outlined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- Since the issue of persecution and hate campaign is long-standing, merely repealing the anti-Ahmadiyya laws will provide little protection to economically-excluded AM women so long as social attitudes toward AM remain biased. Change must come from both the top and the bottom. There should also be a sustained public education campaign aimed at all citizens of Pakistan, especially children, young people and religious clerics, which teaches that intolerance is the biggest enemy of a progressive society and nobody is above the law. Education institutions and other spaces of civic education should be engaged in constructive social activism and this should include the removal of all discriminatory material in school curricula that promotes hatred towards the AMC.
- The media in Pakistan has never been penalised for their role in spreading rumours and hate towards the AMC. There should be a strict check and balance on all forms of media including digital media, print media and social media.
- Hate literature, materials and speeches by political and religious leaders have been used as weapons against religious minorities. Hate speech must be criminalised, and those engaging in hate speech against Ahmadi Muslims must be held accountable.
- The government of Pakistan should devise capacity-building programmes for economically-excluded AM women. There should be financial support provided, either through jobs provision or by including them in training programmes on the procedures and documentation to interact with different public offices, such as local administrations and police stations.

Further reading

- CREID (2020) 'Hate Speech Monitoring Helps Raise Alarm for Ahmadis in Pakistan', *Institute of Development Studies*, 17 September
- McDonagh, S. (2020) 'Why do Ahmadis Muslims in Pakistan not have a Vote?', *Institute of Development Studies*, 14 August
- M.K. (2020) 'Gender-Based Perspectives on Key Issues Facing Poor Ahmadi Women in Pakistan' in M. Tadros (ed.) *Violence and Discrimination against Women of Religious Minority Backgrounds in Pakistan*, CREID Intersection Series: Gender and Religious Inequalities, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: 10.19088/CREID.2020.003
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Credits

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Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK

T +44 (0) 1273 606261

F +44 (0) 1273 621202

E creid@ids.ac.uk

W www.ids.ac.uk/creid

T @CREID_Dev

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