IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

BUILDING A BETTER WORLD: THE CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY OF COVID-19

Editors **Peter Taylor and Mary McCarthy**

Religious Marginality, Covid-19, and Redress of Targeting and Inequalities[*†]

Mariz Tadros,[1] Maryam Kanwer[2] and Jaffer Abbas Mirza[3]

Abstract This article interrogates whether we should consider 'religious marginality' as a qualifier much like the exploration of how gender, ethnicity, and class inequalities are explored when examining Covid-19-related vulnerabilities and their implications for building back better. Drawing on a case study of Pakistan as well as evidence from India, Uganda, and Iraq, this article explores the accentuation of vulnerabilities in Pakistan and how different religious minorities experience the impact of the interplay of class, caste, ethnicity, and religious marginality. The article argues that where religious minorities exist in contexts where the broader political and societal policy is one of religious 'othering' and where religious marginality intersects with socioeconomic exclusion, they experience particular forms of vulnerability associated directly or indirectly with Covid-19 consequences that are acute and dire in impact. Building back better for religiously inclusive societies will require both broad-based as well as more specific redress of inequalities.

Keywords religious equality/inequality, freedom of religion or belief, Covid-19, leave no one behind, Pakistan, Iraq, Uganda, India.

1 Introduction

Does religious affiliation work in the same way as gender, class, and ethnicity as a qualifier in determining vulnerability to Covid-19 infection and in worsening pre-existing inequalities? What does building back better mean for fostering religiously inclusive societies? This article tackles these questions, drawing on the extensive scoping of the impact of Covid-19 on religious minorities and religiously marginalised groups undertaken by the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID). The article interrogates whether we should also consider 'religious marginality' as a qualifier much like gender, ethnicity, and class when examining Covid-19-related vulnerabilities.

The article argues that belonging to a religious minority *per se* does not automatically translate into greater susceptibility to being negatively affected by the pandemic more so than other vulnerable groups in the community. However, where religious minorities exist in contexts where the broader political and societal policy is one of religious 'othering' and where religious marginality intersects with socioeconomic exclusion, they experience particular forms of vulnerability that are acute and dire in their consequences.

Section 2 elucidates the use of concepts such as religious minority, religious othering (see Tadros 2020), the methodology behind this article, and highlights some of the operational tensions in framing faith, religion, and religious equality in relation to the effects – direct or indirect – of Covid-19. Section 3 highlights the dynamics of how several religious minorities, differently situated in Pakistan, were affected by Covid-19 directly or indirectly. Section 4 draws empirical evidence on the intersection of religious marginality with socioeconomic and political inequalities from many contexts. Section 5 offers an analysis of the implications of these particular forms of targeting of religious minorities on social cohesion, security, and wellbeing in particular in terms of building back better.

2 Conceptual framing and operational tensions

Covid-19 is no equaliser. There are multiple ways in which Covid-19 directly or indirectly has affected and been affected by existing power hierarchies and inequalities such as class, gender, geographic location, and ethnicity (UN 2020; Vogels *et al.* 2020; Blundell *et al.* 2020). Ethnicity, for example, in the UK has proven to be an important factor when exploring the disproportionate number of deaths experienced by people from black and minority ethnic groups (BAME). BAME people accounted for 11 per cent of those hospitalised with Covid-19 but over 36 per cent of those admitted to critical care (Butcher and Massey 2020).

Yet it seems that it is not being of an ethnic minority in and of itself that correlates positively with Covid-19 'targeting'; rather, the intersection of belonging to an ethnic minority with a number of other factors. Public Health England (2017) identified geographic location, inequitable access to health care, being disproportionately in public-facing occupations (such as frontline health workers), and historic racism. The latter means that where people are discriminated against in health care, they are less likely to seek health care or 'as NHS staff are less likely to speak up when they have concerns about Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) or risk' (Butcher and Massey 2020). The question is whether similar parallels exist for religious minorities in vulnerability to the detriments of Covid-19. To categorically determine such a question, we would need to have disaggregated data on religious affiliation and such data has not been collected whether for the UK or the contexts in which CREID has operated.

The United Nations definition of 'minority' informs our own, as authors:

> A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members – being nationals of the State – possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language (OHCHR 2010: 2).

This definition is important in that it suggests that majority/minority demarcation is not only based on numbers but a relationship of non-dominance; in other words, a relationship where large numbers of a religious group experience power inequalities. This is critical for our enquiry since empirically being a numerical minority is unlikely on its own to be a marker of increased vulnerability. For example, in Syria, the ruling regime headed by President Assad are Alawites, a religious sect within Shia Islam. Although they are a numerical minority (the majority are Sunnis), it is highly likely that their preferential access to political, economic, and health resources would put them in a less susceptible position than other religious groups in Syria (Chatty 2017).

However, where being a numerical minority intertwines with major power hierarchy differentials, the outcome can be exposure to targeting on account of being the religious other. Religious 'otherisation' entails discriminating against those who share a different faith to the majority, not being 'one of us'. Religious otherisation occurs when there is a narrowly defined conception of belonging such that having the same faith is considered a prerequisite for full membership in a community as an equal (Tadros 2020). 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 his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance (UNGA 1948).

On account of the politicisation of the concept of freedom of religion or belief (Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler 2020), here we refer to religious equality and inequality. This allows us to examine how religious equality/inequality intersects with other qualifiers such as gender, class, ethnicity, and so forth. The case study on Pakistan in Section 3 shows clearly how such intersections are critical for our understanding of the interplay of religious marginality with other factors.

In this article, our focus on religious marginality is not of the marginalisation of the religion itself, or its doctrine or precepts, but the **people** whose religious background makes them subject to marginalisation. The UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, cautions that the right to freedom of religion or belief belongs to individuals, not religions (Shaheed 2020). This differentiation is critical since we, as authors, and also as researchers in CREID,[4] focus on subjects as excluded members of religious minorities, not defending their religions as such. The strength of CREID's framing of religious inclusivity in terms of religious equality and not freedom of religion is manifest *vis-à-vis* the debates on Covid-19 and religion more broadly. In the US, some religious conservative groups (both Christian and Jewish Orthodox) have challenged official restrictions on mass gatherings on account of their infringement on freedom of religion. Such an appropriation of the term for political ends is deemed redundant when we replace the term 'freedom of religion' with 'religious equality'. When public policy is applied to all religious groups, independently of the faith they follow, there is no infringement on the principle of religious equality. In other words, the importance here is the consistency with which it is applied to all faith groups to show government application of the principle of treating all groups of different faiths equally. We will now discuss this in the context of Nigeria and Iraq.

At the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, an active member of an indigenous faith in Nigeria contacted CREID with the view of promoting the idea that the restrictions on mass gatherings are harmful towards small indigenous religions because in the absence of the ability to practise their faith, adherents may join one of the two large Abrahamic religions followed in Nigeria. However, the same restrictions were imposed on followers of the two Abrahamic faiths, and CREID's concern is for championing a redress of violations experienced against people of faith (and no faith) rather than ensuring that a religion is alive and well – even if such a religion was facing an existential threat.

In Iraq, there are a multitude of religions, including those that are despised and demonised by the majority Muslim population such as the Kaka'i faith, Zoroastrianism, and Sabaeans. In many cases, people have had to hide their faith on account of the intolerance displayed towards those who follow these religions which has led to an increasingly small pool of adherents in Iraq (Minority Rights Group 2018). However, in the context of Covid-19, the Iraqi government and Kurdish authorities in Kurdistan pressed people of all religious faiths to desist from participating in collective religious ceremonies because such gatherings increase the risk of those most susceptible to large-scale Covid-19 infections. Those that belong to the Kaka'i faith, whose followers have faced severe persecution, may feel that their religion is disproportionately affected since it is already a religion under attack. However, the Kaka'i leadership did comply with the restrictions on gathering:

> At the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, Nasradeen Haydari, the religious leader of the Yarsanis (which Kaka'is belong to), forbade all social and religious gatherings for his followers as a preventive measure. The Kaka'is in Daquq District heeded the call and have halted all social and religious gathering ever since... All social gatherings like weddings and birthdays have been halted. This is one of the social aspects of the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on the religious minority, next to the health, economic and security aspects (*Kirkuk Now*).

The fact that the Kaka'is as a tiny sect will be deprived of practising a faith that is facing an existential threat is unfortunate. However, it should not be considered a right that people who follow the Kaka'i faith be given exemptions from the prohibition on mass gatherings because their religion is at risk. Ultimately, concern for the safety and health of the people of the Kaka'i faith, all faiths, and no faiths trumps concern for the preservation of the religion itself, as was demonstrated by the Kaka'i religious leader in the quotation above. Herein lies the distinction between protecting religious equality for a people and protecting the religion itself, even though the demarcations are not always so clear cut.

The research presented in this article draws on the work undertaken by CREID during February–September 2020 in documenting the experiences of religious marginality intersecting with other inequalities as recorded by members of the communities, activists, researchers, and development practitioners. At the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, CREID asked its partners in some select countries (Pakistan and Iraq in particular) to document how their work with people living in religious marginality is being affected and how people's lives are being shaped by the pandemic and how they are responding to it. Further, we sought documentation of the impact of Covid-19 on religious minorities from development practitioners based in other countries in which CREID has partners, such as India.

Much of this data have been published in the form of blogs; other findings are shared in papers which were still under peer review at the time of writing. The blogs are from India, Pakistan, Iraq, and Uganda, and some draw on other global contexts. The empirical evidence has been complemented with some secondary data analysis that primarily comprises grey literature in view of the limited academic scholarship on religious marginality and Covid-19 that was yet to be released at the time of writing. The dynamics of how Covid-19 has affected the status and situation of religious minorities were analysed, taking into consideration the presence of religious minorities of different faiths and their historical relations with the majority. However, they all experience vulnerability on account of the intertwining factors at hand.

The empirical case study on Pakistan is informed by primary data in the form of semi-structured interviews, stories, and a

survey. During Covid-19, we interviewed members of the Christian community in Lahore, Shia Hazaras in Quetta, and Hindus in Karachi through community interlocutors belonging to these communities. Section 3 also relies on the interviews and blogs produced by Ravadar.[5] Ravadar's information gathering included one-to-one and telephone semi-structured interviews with members of Christian, Hindu, and Shia communities living in Lahore (Punjab), Islamabad (federal territory), and Karachi (Sindh). The interviews were conducted by the interlocutors belonging to the same communities between August and October 2020.

The case of Pakistan was chosen on account of the diversity of experience and drivers of targeting towards the Shia minority which is rooted in political economy, as well as historical, ideological, and geostrategic factors. However, Pakistan is not an anomaly in how the official handling of Covid-19 and societal responses to the pandemic have accentuated the vulnerability of religious minorities to religious otherisation, as will be discussed in Section 3.

3 Pakistan

Muslims constitute 96.28 per cent of the population in Pakistan (PBS n.d.), of which Shias constitute 15–20 per cent (Rieck 2016: 363). Religious minorities comprise: Christians 1.59–2.5 per cent (Mounstephen 2019: 20), Hindu 1.60 per cent, Ahmadiyya Muslims 0.22 per cent, and Scheduled Caste 0.25 per cent, respectively (PBS n.d.). Although there are no official data on people of no faith or atheist, according to one survey conducted in 2012, 2 per cent of the people from the sample size of 2,705 identified themselves as 'a convinced atheist' (WIN-Gallup International 2012: 14).

Although the constitution of Pakistan guarantees protection to minorities, in the last 70 years, religious minorities in Pakistan have often been denied fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution. The declaration of Ahmadis as 'non-Muslims', the misuse of the blasphemy law against Christians, forced conversions of Hindus in Sindh, and violence against Shias are some of the examples of the persecution of religious communities in Pakistan.

Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 in Pakistan, although terror incidents by religious militant groups against religious minorities had declined, the situation of religious minorities was disturbing. According to a report published on 16 March 2020, on religious-inspired violence targeting religious minorities between July 2018 and February 2020, there were an estimated 31 deaths, with 58 people injured, and 25 blasphemy cases reported (Mirza 2020a). In the case of the Shia Hazaras in Baluchistan in the southwest part of Pakistan, their demonisation has been on account of the intersection of religious marginality with ethnicity, socioeconomic exclusion, and geographic locality. For example, in their vicinity, Covid-19 was referred to as the 'Shia virus' (Mirza 2020b).

In the case of Hindus in Sindh Province, their ostracisation has been on account of religion, caste (belonging to the *dalits*), class (socioeconomically deprived), and geopolitics (the conflict between Pakistan and India). In the case of Christians in Pakistan, there are similar dynamics: while they too live in geographically deprived parts of the country, they also experience vilification on account of religion, caste (belonging to the *dalits*), class (socioeconomically deprived), and profession (they are associated with what society considers 'dirty' jobs such as cleaners and sewage workers).

3.1 Stigmatisation of Hazaras

Shia Hazaras, who mainly live in two areas, that is, Mariabad and Hazara Town, in Quetta, are one of the most persecuted religio-ethnic minorities in Pakistan. They have unique Mongolian features which make them easily identifiable among different ethnicities residing in Balochistan. According to official data, from 2013–18, at least 509 Hazaras lost their lives (NCHR 2018: 2). The gruesome killings of Hazaras even forced the former chief justice of Pakistan, Saqib Nisar, to admit that the killings are 'equivalent to wiping out an entire generation' (Shah 2018).

In February 2020, Hazaras were in the news, but this time as culprits not victims. On 28 February, the Pakistani authorities had to re-open the borders for Shia Hazaras, returning pilgrims who were stranded on the Balochistan–Iran border as the virus engulfed Qom and Mashhad (two holy sites for Shias) on the other side in Iran (Aamir 2020). According to one report, only Shia pilgrims (both Hazara and non-Hazara Shias) were initially held in quarantine camps, and around 1,704 non-Shia and non-Hazara returnees such as traders and tourists were allowed entry after a minor temperature check (*ibid*.). Since Covid-19 cases were increasing in Mashhad and Qom, it seems authorities had assumed that the virus in Iran was only restricted to these two cities and, therefore, only Shias could be the carriers. Nevertheless, due to abysmal conditions in the camps, pilgrims were sent back to their respective provinces. However, in Balochistan, Hazaras – despite constituting a small proportion of the returnees from Iran (Changezi 2020) – were disproportionately targeted and stigmatised as the transmitters of the virus.

Even before the announcement of any lockdown in Balochistan or any study that mentions the 'hotspots' in the province, some public departments decided on their own to stop Hazaras coming to work. In one notification by the Inspector General of Police, Balochistan, policemen belonging to the Hazara community were asked not to come to work for two weeks, fearing they could transmit the virus (Akbar 2020). However, after pressure from the community and civil society, the Inspector General withdrew the notification on 12 March and instructed that only those policemen (including non-Hazaras) who came from Iran in the last 15 days should isolate.[6] A similar notification

issued by the Water and Sanitation Authority had instructed the restriction of Hazaras in their two localities (*Naya Daur* 2020a). Eventually, the Chief Secretary, the most senior administrative authority in the province, announced that two Hazara areas would be cordoned off from the rest of the city (*Daily Balochistan Express* 2020). In private offices, public hospitals, and banks, Hazara employees were either sent on forced leave or asked not to come in (Mirza 2020b).

The government's mishandling of the Covid-19 spread and the singling out of Hazaras seems to have influenced ordinary people, particularly their view of the Hazara community. In one of the unpublished surveys, we asked 100 non-Hazara people in Quetta if they thought the virus spread was due to Shia pilgrims coming from Iran. Thirty-nine per cent of the respondents answered positively while 25 per cent remained neutral or undecided. Though the sample is not an accurate representation of the entire city, it signals that some people still attach the stigma of the spreading of the virus to the whole Hazara community. As a consequence, Hazaras have been denied access to medical facilities as non-Hazaras have viewed the community as a potential transmitter of the virus (Aman 2020).

3.2 Unprotected and unpaid Christian frontline workers

The persecution of Christians in Pakistan is multilayered. They are either called or considered 'dirty' or 'untouchable' on account of the intertwining of religious marginality and caste, given that many belong to the *dalit* population. In Pakistan, they have, subsequently, been limited to sanitation or janitor jobs (Shoaib and Mirza 2019: 41). Moreover, Christians have been often framed with false blasphemy charges under 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code XLV 1860.[7] According to one source, there are around 200 active blasphemy cases (Lehner and Pontifex 2019)[8] against Christians and an estimated 40 of them are on death row (USCIRF 2018: 4).

On 29 March 2020, during a food relief drive, Christians were barred from receiving aid as one Sunni cleric instructed volunteers that the aid is for 'Muslims only' (Khokhar 2020). In another incident, a Christian woman confirmed in a video that she was asked to embrace Islam in order to receive food aid (Mirza 2020c). In Sandha Village in the Kasur district of Punjab, a Muslim man helped 100 Christian families who were initially denied aid, again on the instruction of a Sunni cleric, on the basis of their Christian identity (*International Christian Concern* 2020). The majority of these kinds of cases were not even formally reported; that is, where faith-based organisations were involved. Christians had complained that they were discouraged to apply for aid, as the aid was for Muslims only. In one case, one organisation even put a board out discouraging 'non-Muslims' to come to the tent where aid was being distributed (Mirza 2020c).

Most of the sanitation workers in Pakistan (75–80 per cent) belong to the Christian community. Given their role as frontline fighters against the spread of the disease, scant attention has been paid to their safety and protection during the pandemic (Aqeel 2020). In one revealing report, when many were avoiding going near quarantine camps where Shia Hazaras were held, Christian sanitation workers were forced to go there with no PPE (*ibid*.).[9] To accentuate their repression, they were compelled to work long hours while being denied the timely disbursement of their wages. Many of the Christian women, who mostly work as domestic helps or at beauty salons, were let go by their employers who were concerned that they were carriers of the virus. This occurred in places such as in Islamabad, where some Christian women, particularly those who worked as maids, had lost their jobs in the first wave of Covid-19 (Ravadar 2020b). No consideration was made for their survival as they faced dispossession following their loss of income, which was compounded in many cases by the loss of income also faced by male members of their families.

3.3 Covid-19 accentuating unequal access to welfare benefits for Hindu women

Hindus experience multiple intertwining sources of vulnerability in Pakistan. Hindus are seen as 'Other', a group which is 'different' from Muslims.[10] Where Hindus are *dalits*, they are ostracised on account of caste by non-*dalit* Hindus as well as the broader Pakistani society where caste and class prejudice is widespread. It is important to mention that Hindus in Pakistan exist in an uneasy situation where their loyalties always remain in question due to the neighbouring Hindu majority and Pakistan's arch-rival, India. This mindset has often provided impunity to hardliners to discriminate against Hindus as some sort of revenge against India.

One of the Ravadar project's ongoing investigations is exploring, at the onset of Covid-19, the economic loss of Hindu women vendors who sell mainly nuts and dry fruit at Empress Market in Karachi. In late April 2020, when the Sindh government announced a strict lockdown, financially marginalised groups, particularly daily wage earners, had no other option but to defy the rules and look for opportunities. Hindu women vendors, with no other economic opportunities, continued to set up their stalls in Empress Market. As a result, police raided and confiscated all their belongings. Later, when the government had eased restrictions, however, police did not return Hindu women their confiscated possessions, based on the testimonies given by six Hindu women. This has made them assetless and thrown them into debt because the assets had been purchased on loan (Ravadar 2020a).

There is concern that against the backdrop of the international community being fully preoccupied with a focus on countering Covid-19, political society in many countries will seize the

opportunity of attention being deflected elsewhere in order to push for a further religious homogenisation of society and politics. For example, in July 2020, the Punjab Assembly passed an anti-Shia bill, the Protection of Islam Bill (Malik 2020), which was promoted by MPA Muavia Azam, son of the late Azam Tariq who was the leader of an anti-Shia militant organisation, Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan. The bill imposes the Sunni version of history on Shias (Mirza 2020d).

Similarly, a senior minister, Ali Muhammad Khan, openly called for the beheading of blasphemers (making reference to the Ahmadis) (*Naya Daur* 2020b). There is no concrete evidence that in the absence of Covid-19, the same policies would not have been advanced. However, the authors of this article interrogate the nature of the timing of their campaign with respect to the current precarious and volatile environment. The issues we have seen arising in the Pakistan case study are not isolated; they connect strongly with behaviours and responses to religious otherisation observed in other contexts around the world, as will be discussed in Section 4.

4 Accentuating religious inequalities and underlying drivers

The attribution of blame to religious minorities for infecting the religious majority with Covid-19 has been a centuries' old process of associating pandemics and plagues with the presence or role of maligned religious or ethnic minorities. During the plague, thousands of Jewish communities were utterly decimated across Spain, France, down the Rhineland, and throughout Eastern Europe (Morthorst 2020). In Pakistan, the broader majority call Covid-19 the 'Shia virus' (as mentioned in Section 3). In India, Covid-19 has been called the 'coronajihad' by those who blame Indian Muslims for actively seeking to infect the Hindu community, and various other terms such as 'bio-terrorists' and 'the Muslim virus', among others (Nazeer 2020).

These are not simply words in circulation: their widespread sharing has a snowball effect, generating with each sharing more rumours and misinformation. Other than creating rifts and consolidating stereotypes, the snowballing of hate speech does spill over into acts of violence at a community level. In India, Nazeer (*ibid*.) notes a string of attacks, for example:

> Another attack, caught on video, shows a Muslim being beaten up with a bamboo stick by a man asking him about his conspiracy to spread virus. In Gorakhpur, Abdulrahman, a *muezzin* (one who calls to prayer), was attacked and assaulted, along with others who came to his rescue, for continuing the call prayer during the lockdown. In Humnabad, Imam Hafiz Mohammed Naseerudin believed he was assaulted by a police officer because he 'looked Muslim' and was blamed for the spread of the disease (*ibid*.).

The terms used and accusations made while these Muslims were attacked are exactly those that have been in circulation on social media.

The question is, what drives this blaming and vilification? It is difficult not to see this phenomenon as the interface between historically cumulative tensions seething under the surface and the political opportunity seized by power holders to shift the blame from themselves to a religious minority that is already despised. In other words, when people are looking for answers to difficult questions such as why a pandemic is happening, and who is responsible for it, power holders may find it easier to deflect attention from giving account of their own actions/ policies by participating in the blaming of a despised group. For example, one Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, Suresh Tiwari from Uttar Pradesh in India asked Hindus to boycott the purchase of food from Muslims: 'Do not buy from Muslims' as they 'infect vegetables with saliva' to spread the virus (*ibid*.).

If the health hazards associated with Covid-19 and the economic costs to the population at large deepen, the temptation to blame religious minorities for people's suffering may increase. This may have serious ramifications for social cohesion and for spillovers of violence. Building back better can only happen if the power holders arrive at the conclusion that using the mobilisation of hate tactics may contribute to an escalating situation. Building back better requires the identification of perpetrators of rumours and hate speech and holding them to account, but it also requires a more systemic handling of actors who have been emboldened by the Covid-19 crisis to express and act on their visions of religious-inspired supremacy, such as the Hindutva movements in India.

4.1 Differential access to health information and services

Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic independently of how socially cohesive countries are, or the nature of the kind of inequalities they experience, ultimately requires the forging of a common narrative around the idea that everyone is susceptible, and only when we recognise our interdependence can we organise a concerted effort to address the pandemic (Tadros 2020). In many countries, leaders have called upon representatives of stakeholders to join in consultations on how to address this international pandemic. However, who is included and excluded on the list of official invitations to consultations is often simultaneously reflective of prejudices as well as power hierarchies.

In Uganda, in response to the Covid-19 crisis, President Yoweri Museveni held a consultative meeting with the leaders of Uganda's major religions, under the umbrella of the Inter-Religious Council (IRC) of Uganda. Yet the officially recognised IRC is exclusionary, acknowledging only seven of the main religions

practised in Uganda and excluding others, such as many of the indigenous religions (for example, groups who live in the Rwenzori Mountains and who believe the mountains to be the home of their god Kitasamba) as well as smaller groups such as the Baha'is (Muhumuza and Kaahwa 2020).

Smaller religious minorities have been excluded from platforms such as the radio, where allotments of radio time have been accorded to other religious groups to disseminate messages and information to their followers on protective measures against Covid-19 and how to get help. In a context where collective action is deeply circumscribed, there has been an absence of official endorsement to smaller religious minorities to extend community outreach, with the health and economic measures needed to deal with the effects of Covid-19, and which in contrast, have been accorded to larger religious groups.

This official prejudice may have been reflective of the absence of political clout of smaller religious groups rather than an ideological position *per se*. However, its outcome is likely to be far-reaching. Not only does it circumscribe efforts to contain Covid-19, but it is likely to create deep fissures within communities around equality and inclusion. Building back better necessities creating more inclusive representative platforms and spaces, as well as a collective effort to ensure that at all levels of engagement, those on the margins of mainstream religions are accorded the same recognition, representation, and access to participation.

Class and income inequalities have always affected people's access to information and health services independently of their faith or non-faith. However, in many contexts, this also intersects with religious affiliation when citizenship experiences are mediated by whether the person belongs to the religious majority or minority (Leach and Tadros 2014). In Iraq, where the health system has already been run down by decades of conflict and instability and shortage of funds, responding to a pandemic of this scale puts immeasurable pressure on frontline workers responding to the needs of the population at large. While all Iraqis suffered, there were particular groups who experienced a distinct set of intersecting vulnerabilities on account of their positioning in Iraq.

Iraqis living in camps for displaced persons are disproportionately composed of religious minorities who were displaced from their homes with the onslaught of ISIS. There are 86 camps for displaced persons in Iraq, in which some families have been living for the past five years and others for longer (Aziz 2020). The absence of the most elementary rule of law and security has meant that it has been several years now that they have been living in these camps. The response to Covid-19 has affected Iraqis living in camps for displaced persons in very distinct

ways because unlike other Iraqis who could at least travel to a pharmacy or health clinic in their vicinity, those in camps have been unable to travel outside them because of a strict curfew enforced on their mobility.

In a context of a severe shortage of health supplies and sometimes the existence of only one health clinic in the camp serving several thousands, this has further accentuated displaced people's suffering on account of its accentuation of pre-existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities. Building back better necessitates going beyond making masks available in camps for displaced persons or building a new health clinic. It fundamentally requires dealing with the political economy drivers and security deficits that have led to thousands of Iraqis living in these camps. It means providing safety and security to displaced citizens so that they can rebuild their lives and livelihoods in areas where they presided prior to the onslaught of ISIS.

5 Concluding reflections: nuancing the debates
In response to Covid-19, the role of religious repertoires[11] becomes very important, not least in terms of the role of faith leaders in shaping faith adherents' responses to the disease or in the role of faith for sense-making and resilience. However, discourses of religious supremacy – the assumption that adherence to a particular religion places followers in a privileged position in comparison to non-followers with respect to susceptibility – run counter to ideas of humanity's interdependence in overcoming Covid-19 (Tadros 2020). On the other hand, we have also witnessed many leaders of all faiths encouraging followers to draw on religious heritage traditions of adaptation and innovation in order to practise their faiths while adhering to the 'new normal' in protective measures (*ibid*.). Religious leaders who follow the same religion, and sometimes the same denomination in the same context, at the same point in time, can draw on repertoires of a religious nature to endorse contradicting positions on responding to Covid-19. Hence, the issue is not whether religion in and of itself is anathema to countering Covid-19, since there are religious repertoires in the form of doctrine, tradition, and practices that can be appropriated for all kinds of messages in relation to Covid-19.

Yet if building back better necessitates taking the interconnectedness of humanity seriously, then religious inequalities need to be brought into the equation, much like we engage with ethnic, class, or gender inequalities. In fact, the prospects of building back better are most enhanced if religious inequalities are examined in their relationship or interplay with these other inequalities. The scapegoating of religious and ethnic minorities for the presence and spread of the pandemic (as was illustrated in calling Covid-19 the 'Shia virus' in Pakistan or 'coronajihad' in India) suggests that building back better will require much more than a set of health interventions to contain

the devastation caused by the pandemic. Another form of devastation is at stake, and that is the escalation into communal violence and ruptures in social cohesion. As long as power holders consider blaming religious minorities as a way of gaining popular support or as a way to deflect attention from their own failures, the prospects of building back better will be far removed.

The experiences of different religious minorities in Pakistan described in this article shed light on the multiple ways in which religious marginality intersects with pre-existing political, economic, and social inequalities. The intersection of religious and ethnic marginality in the case of the Hazara Shias was amplified in responses to Covid-19, with discourses and practices that treat them like ticking bombs, a concept altogether common historically in political projects aimed at eliminating peoples under the pretext that they are the carriers of disease. It may be argued that, in the case of Christians in Pakistan, it is the intersection of religious, class, and caste marginality that has meant that the Pakistani government has treated them like disposable human beings.

The historical assignment of poor *dalit* Christians in Pakistan to low-paying socially stigmatised cleaning professions was further amplified under Covid-19 as they were pressed to assume frontline work – without the PPE gear needed to protect them. The impact is not only in terms of heightened vulnerability to infection, but psychological: the notion that they do not deserve the credit, recognition, or resources to undertake roles that no one else will touch. The intersection of religious and caste marginality for the Hindus of Pakistan also exposed ways in which their pre-existing socioeconomic vulnerability placed them in a position where access to resources to mitigate the negative economic effects of Covid-19 became subject to conditional food for abandonment of their faith practices.

These examples from Pakistan, Iraq, and Uganda show that building back better will also necessitate new forms of accountability. First, regarding the government narrative around the drivers of the pandemic and how to contain it. It must show a zero-tolerance policy for those that engage in blaming and singling out minorities (religious or otherwise) for the spread of a pandemic and for its prevalence among its ranks, be they senior or junior.

Second, there needs to be a dissemination of a counternarrative to hate speech against religious minorities for all those committed to social justice within civil society. International development actors engaging in political economy analysis of inclusion/ exclusion in society and vulnerability to pandemics need to be mindful of religious marginality in religiously heterogenous communities where there are religious inequalities. It starts with international development actors asking questions such as:

- 'To what extent have the religiously marginalised been consulted on measures to ensure that no one is left behind?';

- 'To what extent are measures to mitigate vulnerability taking into account spatial, ideological, and socioeconomic barriers to adequate community outreach?'; and

- 'To what extent is the broader increased suffering of a population potentially going to spill over into blaming religious minorities and potentially spilling over into violence?'.

It is important to note that religious minorities' vulnerability to experiencing Covid-19 effects in an amplified manner is often on account of indirect international or government actions. In other words, addressing hardships of socioeconomically excluded religious minorities requires more than a compartmentalised approach. It necessitates exploring, for example, the degree of social spending by a government in general on education, health, and welfare in times of precarity; of how the health system as a whole functions and is equipped for crises; and how it is supporting those with precarious livelihoods.

These broader sets of policies in and of themselves, unless they are sensitive to religious inequalities, may miss the mark of affecting those experiencing religious marginality. Conversely, policies under a 'new normal' that do not shield the vulnerable are most certainly going to have religiously marginalised members of the community, as well as having the unintended consequence of increasing the blaming of religious minorities for hardship. Any new normal will have to simultaneously address the wellbeing concerns of all the population, as well as engage with policies that directly address the specificity of the vulnerabilities of religious minorities where they exist.

Notes
1 Mariz Tadros, Director of the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) and Professor of Politics and Development, Institute of Development Studies (IDS).
2 Maryam Kanwer, human rights activist and development professional.
3 Jaffer Abbas Mirza, independent researcher.
4 **CREID** is a consortium convened by the Institute of Development Studies, comprising three key partners (Minority

Rights Group, Al-Khoei Foundation, and Refcemi) and more than 30 partners from faith-based and non-faith-based, human rights, development, and academic backgrounds. CREID endeavours to make development more aware of, and responsive to, religious inequalities faced by people living in poverty and experiencing multiple intersecting inequalities.

5 The Al-Khoei Foundation, London, in collaboration with HIVE Pakistan, Islamabad, is currently implementing a research-based development project called Ravadar under the CREID programme. Ravadar also has a blog component on which we draw, which provides a platform to local activists/ community interlocutors belonging to three different religious minorities, i.e. Shias, Hindus, and Christians. The primary focus of Ravadar is to document and explore issues, including economic losses, discrimination, and violence, faced by these three communities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

6 **Sajjad H. Changezi tweet**, 13 March 2020.

7 *Pakistan Penal Code*.

8 According to one study, between 1987 and 2018, there were 1,572 blasphemy cases: 728 Muslims, 516 Ahmadi Muslims, 253 Christians, and 31 Hindus. The religious identity of the remaining 44 people was not known (U Din 2019: 29).

9 It is important to note that all sanitation workers in Pakistan are Christian and Hindu, on account of the intersection of caste and religious minority status. They are despised by both the Sunnis and Shias who see them as 'unclean'. These camps happened to be occupied by the Shias.

10 The All India Muslim League advanced the two-nation theory, the basis of the 1947 Partition, which framed Muslims and Hindus as two separate nations.

11 The resources of a religious or spiritual nature that people draw on to survive and cope.

References

Aamir, A. (2020) '**Who is Responsible for the Disaster in Taftan?**', *The Friday Times*, 20 March (accessed 4 October 2020)

Akbar, M. (2020) 'پر نشانے پھر برادری بزارہ :کرونا', *Independent Urdu*, 2 April (accessed 4 October 2020)

Aman, M. (2020) *Go In Disguise to Receive Medical Treatment' – Religious Discrimination in Pakistan*, Religious Inequalities and the Impact of Covid-19 blog, 9 July (accessed 10 October 2020)

Aqeel, A. (2020) *Unprotected, Unpaid or Unrecognised: Christian Workers on the Frontline in Pakistan's Fight Against Covid-19*, Religious Inequalities and the Impact of Covid-19 blog, 28 May (accessed 10 October 2020)

Aziz, A. (2020) '**Coronavirus: Shortage of Protective Equipment Endangers Thousands of IDPs**', *Kirkuk Now*, 30 April (accessed 22 February 2021)

Blundell, R.; Costa Dias, M.; Joyce, R. and Xiaowei, X. (2020) '**COVID-19 and Inequalities**', *Fiscal Studies* 41.2: 291–319, DOI: 10.1111/1475-5890.12232 (accessed 18 January 2021)

Butcher, B. and Massey, J. (2020) '**Why are More People from BAME Backgrounds Dying from Coronavirus?**', *BBC*, 19 June (accessed 18 January 2021)

Changezi, S.H. (2020) '**Social Boycott?**', *Dawn*, 29 March (accessed 6 October 2020)

Chatty, D. (2017) *Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refuge State*, London: Hurst & Company

Daily Balochistan Express (2020) '**Coronavirus: Balochistan Govt Decides to Cordon Off Hazara Town and Marriabad Areas**', 26 March (accessed 4 October 2020)

International Christian Concern (2020) '**Muslim Activist Provides Critical Aid to Pakistani Christians Amid COVID-19 Pandemic**', 14 April (accessed 4 October 2020)

Khokhar, S. (2020) '**Coronavirus: Karachi NGO Denies Food to Poor Hindus and Christians**', *AsiaNews.it*, 30 March (accessed 4 October 2020)

Kirkuk Now (2020) '**Coronavirus Stifles Social and Religious Gatherings for Kaka'is**', *Kirkuk Now*, 27 September (accessed 22 February 2021)

Leach, M. and Tadros, M. (2014) 'Epidemics and the Politics of Knowledge: Contested Narratives in Egypt's H1N1 Response', *Medical Anthropology* 33.3: 240–54

Lehner, T. and Pontifex, J. (2019) '**Pakistan: Nearly 200 Cases of Christians on Blasphemy Charges**', *Independent Catholic News*, 23 January (accessed 4 October 2020)

Malik, A. (2020) '**Punjab Assembly Passes Tahaffuz-E-Bunyad-E-Islam Bill**', *Geo TV*, 23 July (accessed 4 October 2020)

Minority Rights Group (2018) *Iraq* (accessed 18 January 2021)

Mirza, J.A. (2020a) '**Religious Minorities in "Naya Pakistan"**', *The Diplomat*, 16 March (accessed 4 October 2020)

Mirza, J.A. (2020b) *Pakistan's Hazara Shia Minority Blamed for Spread of Covid-19*, Religious Inequalities and the Impact of Covid-19 blog, 17 April (accessed 4 October 2020)

Mirza, J.A. (2020c) '**COVID-19 Fans Religious Discrimination in Pakistan**', *The Diplomat*, 28 April (accessed 4 October 2020)

Mirza, J.A. (2020d) '**The Changing Landscape of Anti-Shia Politics in Pakistan**', *The Diplomat*, 28 September (accessed 4 October 2020)

Morthorst, L. (2020) *Scapegoating of Religious Minorities During Covid-19: Is History Repeating Itself?*, Religious Inequalities and the Impact of Covid-19 blog, 29 June (accessed 4 October 2020)

Mounstephen, P. (2019) *Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians* (accessed 10 October 2020)

Muhumuza, M. and Kaahwa, M. (2020) '**Uganda's COVID-19 Neglect of Minorities is Bad for Everyone**', *African Arguments*, 22 June (accessed 22 February 2021)

Naya Daur (2020a) '**Quetta's Water & Sanitation Authority Issues Order to Confine Hazara Employees to "Their Areas"**', 14 March (accessed 4 October 2020)

Naya Daur (2020b) '**Minister Ali Muhammad Khan Says Blasphemers Should Be Beheaded**', 30 April (accessed 4 October 2020)

Nazeer, A. (2020) *India's Muslim Minority Experiences Increased Targeting and Violence During Covid-19*, CREID blog, 4 June (accessed 22 February 2021)

NCHR (2018) *Understanding the Agonies of Ethnic Hazaras*, Islamabad: National Commission for Human Rights (accessed 4 October 2020)

OHCHR (2010) *Minority Rights: International Standards and Guidelines for Implementation*, New York NY and Geneva: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (accessed 2 February 2021)

PBS (n.d.) *Population by Religion*, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (accessed 12 October 2020)

Public Health England (2017) *Public Health Outcomes Framework: Health Equity Report: Focus on Ethnicity*, London: Public Health England (accessed 18 January 2021)

Ravadar (2020a) '**Plight of Hindu Women Vendors of Empress Market**', 14 September (accessed 4 October 2020)

Ravadar (2020b) '**Christian Househelp Suffers at the Hand of COVID-19**', 3 September (accessed 4 October 2020)

Rieck, A.T. (2016) *The Shias of Pakistan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Shah, S.A. (2018) '**Hazara Killings Tantamount to Wiping Out an Entire Generation, Says Chief Justice**', *Dawn*, 11 May (accessed 5 October 2020)

Shaheed, A. (2020) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief: Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination in the Name of Religion or Belief*, United Nations General Assembly (accessed 3 February 2021)

Shoaib, A. and Mirza, J.A. (2019) 'Exploring and Understanding the Intersecting Inequalities in Everyday Life Faced by Shias of Mochi Gate, Lahore, and Christians of Youhanabad, Bahar Colony, Joseph Colony (Lahore) and 66 Quarters (Islamabad)', report commissioned by Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, unpublished

Tadros, M. (2020) *Invisible Targets of Hatred: Socioeconomically Excluded Women from Religious Minority Backgrounds*, CREID Working Paper 2, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (accessed 25 February 2021)

Tadros, M. and Sabates-Wheeler, R. (2020) *Inclusive Development: Beyond Need, Not Creed*, CREID Working Paper 1, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies (accessed 22 February 2021)

U Din, N. (2019) *Challenges in Exercising Religious Freedom in Pakistan*, Lahore: Centre for Social Justice (accessed 6 October 2020)

UN (2020) *UN Research Roadmap for the COVID-19 Recovery: Leveraging the Power of Science for a More Equitable, Resilient and Sustainable Future*, New York NY: United Nations (accessed 28 November 2020)

UNGA (1948) *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Resolution 217A, United Nations General Assembly (accessed 18 January 2021)

USCIRF (2018) *Tier 1 USCIRF-Recommended Countries of Particular Concern*, Washington DC: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (accessed 4 October 2020)

Vogels, E.; Perrin, A.; Rainie, L. and Anderson, M. (2020) '**53% of Americans Say the Internet Has Been Essential During the COVID-19 Outbreak**', *Pew Research Organization*, 30 April (accessed 27 November 2020)

WIN-Gallup International (2012) *Global Index of Religion and Atheism* (accessed 4 October 2020)

This page is intentionally left blank