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Deaf Uzbek Jehovah's Witnesses: The Case of Intersection of Disability, Ethnic and Religious Inequalities in Post-Soviet Uzbekistan

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Dilmurad Yusupov

Summary

This study explores how intersecting identities based on disability, ethnicity and religion impact the wellbeing of deaf Uzbek Jehovah's Witnesses in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. By analysing the collected ethnographic data and semi-structured interviews with deaf people, Islamic religious figures, and state officials in the capital city Tashkent, it provides the case of how a reaction of a majority religious group to the freedom of religious belief contributes to the marginalisation and exclusion of religious deaf minorities who were converted from Islam to the Jehovah's Witnesses. The paper argues that the insensitivity of the dominant Muslim communities to the freedom of religious belief of deaf Uzbek Christian converts excluded them from their project activities and allocation of resources provided by the newly established Islamic Endowment Public charity foundation 'Vaqf'. Deaf people in Uzbekistan are often stigmatised and discriminated against based on their disability identity, and religious inequality may further exacerbate existing challenges, lead to unintended exclusionary tendencies within the local deaf communities, and ultimately inhibit the formation of collective deaf identity and agency to advocate for their legitimate rights and interests.

Keywords: Deaf, Uzbekistan, Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses, religious inequality, freedom of religion or belief, disability and religion, religion and development.

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Acronyms

BCV	Basic calculation value in Uzbekistan
CPC	Countries of Particular Concern
CRA	Committee for Religious Affairs under the Cabinet of Minister of the Republic of Uzbekistan
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
FoRB	Freedom of Religion or Belief
GoU	Government of Uzbekistan
JWs	Jehovah's Witnesses
Mahalla committee	A self-governing body of citizens headed by a respected elder
MBU	Muslim Board of Uzbekistan
RSL	Russian Sign Language
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TPEs	Training and Production Enterprises – specialised production units under the Society of the Deaf of Uzbekistan (NGO)
USL	Uzbek Sign Language

Terminology notice

This working paper uses person-first language, which puts the person first and then his or her impairment (persons with disabilities, a person with a hearing impairment, people with hearing impairments) which is in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Moreover, I do not use 'deaf' with a capital 'D' as deaf people in contemporary Uzbekistan do not identify themselves as a cultural minority as in other English-speaking countries.

1 Introduction

The relationship of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and international development is an overlooked topic in both academia and development practice (Tadros and Sabates-Wheeler 2020), while the relationship of disability, religious insensitivity, and inclusive development is significantly overlooked, particularly when it comes to disability and development research in the Global South (Grech and Soldatic 2016). Moreover, such evidence is scarce in the post-Soviet space, which has been a blind spot due to the politically induced challenges to conducting fieldwork research and language barriers for English-speaking academic institutions and development agencies. Importantly, persons with disabilities are explicitly referred to in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations 2015), and disability is included in five Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to education, employment, reducing inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, and global partnerships, with the central message **'leave no one behind'**.

However, to date, there are almost no studies that have investigated the association between disability, freedom of religion, and social development in the context of post-communist transition states such as Uzbekistan. This working paper focuses on how intersecting identities based on disability, ethnicity, and religion impact the wellbeing of deaf Uzbek Jehovah's Witnesses. This paper provides a case of religious conversion of deaf and hard-of-hearing Uzbek people by the Jehovah's Witnesses (JWs) in Tashkent and how discrimination on account of their multiple intersecting identities such as deafness, ethnicity, and religious identity exposes them to further marginalisation and social exclusion.

2 The religious context of Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan gained its independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union and presents a unique and complex religious context where any faith-based activities have been strictly controlled and monitored by the state. About seventy years of Soviet rule put restrictions on practising any religion, whether Islam, Christianity, or any other faith, as the communist ideology was based on 'state atheism'. After the collapse of the USSR, independent Uzbekistan adopted its Constitution in 1992, which provides freedom of conscience to all its citizens who have the right to profess a religion or not to profess any religion while any compulsory imposition of religion is not permissible by law.¹

¹ Article 31 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan adopted on 8 December 1992, <https://constitution.uz/en/clause/index>.

Uzbekistan is a secular state where government and religion are separated according to the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations. This law provides for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)² which is in line with Article 18 of the 1948 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.³ Thus, every citizen of Uzbekistan is equal before the law regardless of their attitude to religion and

any restriction of rights and establishment of direct or indirect advantages of citizens depending on their attitude to religion, incitement of hostility and hatred or insult to the feelings of citizens in connection with their religious or atheistic convictions, as well as desecration of venerated religious objects of worship entail liability established by law.⁴

Currently, Sunni Islam is the dominant religion in Uzbekistan and 88 per cent of the population claim that they are Muslims, while Eastern Orthodox account for 9 per cent of the population and other religions for 3 per cent.⁵ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan reports that 93–94 per cent of the population are Muslims belonging to the Hanafi School but about 1 per cent of the population are Shia of the Jafari School who reside in the regions of Bukhara and Samarkand (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2021: 3). As of 2020, 2.2 per cent of the population were Russian Orthodox, while this number is decreasing due to the emigration of ethnic Russians (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2021). The Uzbek ethnic population comprise the majority of about 83.8 per cent of the entire population, which reached 33.9 million people in 2020.⁶ The exact data on the religious and ethnic makeup of the population does not exist as a population census has not been conducted since 1989. Based on the reports and statistics of the Uzbek government, minority religious communities such as Catholics, ethnic Korean Christians, Baptists, Lutherans, Seventh-Day Adventists, evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Buddhists, Baha'is, members of the

² Article 3, The Right to Freedom of Conscience and Article 5, The Separation of Religion from the Government of the Law 'On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations' No. 618-I from 1 May 1998, www.lex.uz/acts/65089.

³ www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights.

⁴ Article 4, equality of citizens regardless of their attitude to the religion of the Law 'On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations' No. 618-I from 1 May 1998, www.lex.uz/acts/65089.

⁵ According to US Government estimates. See *The CIA World Factbook*, Uzbekistan, www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/uzbekistan.

⁶ The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, <https://stat.uz/en/official-statistics/demography>.

International Society of Krishna Consciousness, and atheists make up 1.8 per cent of the entire population (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2021: 3). As of 6 July 2020, in total, 2,243 religious organisations were registered across Uzbekistan, which in addition to Sunni Islam, represent 16 different religious communities.⁷ About 92 per cent of all registered religious organisations are Islamic while the other 8 per cent belong to minority religious communities.

Table 1 Registered religious organisations in Uzbekistan in 2020

Religious organisations	Number
Islam	2069
Russian Orthodox Church	33
Roman Catholic Church	4
Full Gospel Church	55
Evangelical Christian Baptist Church	22
Seventh-Day Adventist Church	9
New Apostolic Church	3
Evangelical Lutheran Church	2
Church of Voice of God	1
Jehovah's Witnesses	1
Korean Protestant Church	26
Armenian Apostolic Church	2
Jewish religious communities	8
Bahai religious communities	6
Krishna Consciousness society	1
Buddhist temple	1
Uzbekistan Bible Society	1

Source: Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan (2020).

Although Uzbekistan is a secular state by its Constitution, there are diverse interpretations and discourses on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the country. SFCG (2021) distinguishes three groups that shape local understandings of religious freedoms: state institutions and the government-controlled Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (MBU), which is the leading Islamic administering body, the liberal Islamic opposition, and the radical Islamic opposition abroad. Therefore, the Muslim community is not united and does not have a unified position towards FoRB. Although the understanding of FoRB by the state-

⁷ List of religious organisations in the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Committee of Religious Affairs, Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, <https://religions.uz/en/pages/view?id=68>.

owned mass media and the MBU is the closest to international norms, the government and the majority religious community tend to impose various restrictions such as strict control and monitoring of religious activities, burdensome procedures for registering religious organisations, and framing religious activities of minority groups such as JW as maleficent missionary work.

The second group of the liberal Islamic opposition, which accepts the existing secular state and its laws, interprets FoRB mainly through the prism of Islamic norms and prescriptions, and adheres to the dominance of the Islamic community in the country.

Finally, the third radical Islamic opposition group denies the legitimacy of the current secular state and sees FoRB only through radical interpretations of Islam that do not tolerate adherents of a different faith. In general, the Uzbek government justifies its restrictive practices towards FoRB by the complexity of the local context in favour of the majority Muslim groups that impose their 'own and largely selfish currents of religious freedoms' on believers and the state (SFCG 2021: 27).

Moreover, in the contemporary local context, belonging to the Uzbek ethnic identity is conflated with Muslim religious identity (Hilgers 2009) so that by birth, Uzbeks are recognised as Muslims. Being Uzbek and not Muslim is perceived as a contradiction in the established system of religious identification. Notably, the intertwinement of 'Uzbekness' and 'Muslimness' is associated with adherence to social and cultural norms through the practice of customs and traditions around male circumcision, marriage, and death, which are essential to create and sustain social networks of mutual self-help within the Uzbek communities (Louw 2018: 89). In addition, frequenting mosques and performing religious rites serve as an integral function of inclusion into the 'mosque community' (in Uzbek, *masjid qavmi*) and provides access to psychological, financial, and other kinds of support. Therefore, the 'Uzbek Muslim' ethnoreligious identity is promoted both by the Islamic religious organisations and the state as the only acceptable way of religious identification for the Uzbeks.

Although the state-controlled media is flooded with discourses on interfaith stability and religious tolerance, and the government regularly boasts about the long-term peaceful coexistence of 16 various religious denominations, the realities on the ground are quite complex in terms of FoRB of Uzbeks. They wish to be part of the non-dominant religious communities. Uzbeks who are recognised by the majority society as '**Muslims by birth**' (even if they do not practise Islam) who were converted to any variety of Christian religion are often considered to be victims of religious sects which 'weaken and disintegrate the

hearts of our people [Uzbek Muslims] and prevent them from living independently under various political and economic pressures' (Sobirov 2019, unpaginated).

In other words, the government and the dominant religious groups believe that those Uzbeks who were converted to another religion other than Islam were actually deceived, despite their own will and primary ethnoreligious identification. The MBU promotes the notion of a **'traditional Muslim'** whose ethnic, cultural, and religious ideological traits are interconnected, and justifies it with the unity of 'spiritual-historical roots' which form the power of the country (*ibid.*). Within this authoritarian system of state guardianship and control over its citizens' spirituality (SFCG 2021: 26), an individual religious choice is not recognised by the state and the dominant religious groups as a conscious decision but imposed by the missionaries and proselytists. However, this contradicts the national and international legal documents which guarantee FoRB.

According to the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations (Government of Uzbekistan (hereinafter referred to as 'GoU') 1998) the state maintains peace and harmony between religious denominations, and actions aimed at converting believers from one denomination to another is legally defined as **'proselytism'** and **'missionary activity'**, which are prohibited by Article 5 of the law. It is illegal to convert someone to another religion and persons who are found guilty of violating the law shall be punished with a fine from 50 to 100 basic calculation values⁸ or administrative arrest of up to 15 days, or compulsory community service up to 360 hours, or restraint of liberty from one to three years, or imprisonment up to three years (GoU 1994a, 1994b).⁹

On the other hand, members of minority religious communities, particularly ethnic Uzbeks who were converted to evangelical Christianity, Pentecostalism, Baptism, and Jehovah's Witnesses suffer continued harassment and discrimination from the majority Muslim population while their own families put pressure on them to reject their new religion (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2020). Although Uzbekistan's Constitution (GoU 1992) and Article 3 of the law on freedom of conscience (GoU 1998) guarantees the constitutional right of citizens to profess any religion or not to profess any, an informed conversion of ethnic Uzbeks to another religion is usually considered by the state and the society as apostasy.

⁸ Basic calculation values (BCVs) as of 1 February 2021 amounted to 245,000 Uzbek soums. Based on the exchange rate of 20 May 2021, 50–100 BCVs amount to about US\$1,156–2,312.

⁹ Article 240, Violation of legislation on religious organisations of the Administrative Liability Code and Article 216, Violation of legislation on religious organisations of the Criminal Code.

Until recently, adherents from these religious groups also faced prosecution from state institutions, and police continually disrupted unregistered religious group meetings and other activities perceived as missionary work and religious conversion (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2018). At the same time, it has been quite difficult for minority religious groups such as JWs to formally register their activities across the country due to legal barriers and resistance from the majority Muslim community. They experience exclusion and discrimination by their own communities and regular persecution and interrogation by police and security services.

2.1 Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan

JWs identify themselves as a Christian denomination with several distinctive traits compared to the other mainstream Christian groups: Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. According to Nikolai Korolev, the representative of the only registered JW religious organisation in the city of Chirchik in Tashkent Region, there are currently about 4,000 followers of JW across Uzbekistan. The case of JW illustrates well the hardships they are encountering in practising their faith and registering their religious organisations in other regions of Uzbekistan. For instance, a 26-year-old ethnic Uzbek non-disabled woman who joined the JWs was persuaded by the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) that she had to be a Muslim and read the Qur'an while her parents worried that if she did not, she could not continue higher education or get married, and would eventually be segregated from society (Atabaeva 2019).

The CRA is a government body consisting of 58 staff members which exercises power over any religious activity in Uzbekistan; its main function is to ensure FoRB in the country by issuing permits to religious organisations and controlling their activities (Hashimova 2019). However, according to a JW representative the Uzbek government repeatedly denied legal registration to their congregations across the country except for one located in Chirchik, Tashkent Region which was first registered in 1994 and re-registered in 1999 (Jehovah's Witnesses n.d.). Consequently, any religious activity outside of their registered organisation is considered by the authorities as illegal.

One of the major obstacles for obtaining registration is the requirement to obtain a legal address certificate from the *mahalla* committee – a local self-governing body at the community level which is led by a chairperson and functions based on the Law on Self-Governing Bodies (GoU 1999). In theory, *mahalla* committees are presented by the state as community-based democratic institutions with a locally elected leader but in practice, *mahallas* are reliant politically and financially on the local governments which manipulate them to strengthen the state's legitimacy (Dadabaev 2013). The local *mahalla* committee

opposed the registration of JWs on several grounds, stating that their activities were ‘**radically dangerous**’, the lack of need for another JW church, or simply refusal without any reason given (Atabaeva 2019, unpaginated).

In 2016, when a new president of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, came to power, he initiated reforms in the religious sphere to change the notoriously negative image of the country as one in which religious freedom is systematically violated (Sheraliev 2020). In his address at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly, Mirziyoyev proposed the adoption of the UN’s special resolution on ‘Education and religious tolerance’ to ‘promote tolerance and mutual respect, ensure religious freedom, protect the rights of believers, and prevent their discrimination’ (Mirziyoyev 2017, unpaginated).

In 2018, the US State Department put Uzbekistan on the list of ‘Countries of Particular Concern’ (CPC) which systematically violate religious freedoms. However, due to the efforts of the new Uzbek government, the country was removed from the ‘Special Watch List’ for religious freedom violations on 7 December 2020 (Pompeo 2020). The Uzbek authorities are planning a simplification of the rules and procedures for registering religious organisations and their reporting requirements through a new Draft Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations published on 19 August 2020 for public discussion¹⁰ (Parliament of Uzbekistan 2020). The new law is expected to abolish the procedure for obtaining consent from the assemblies of citizens (*mahalla* committees) to register a religious organisation, among other changes (Kayumov 2020).

However, even if the legal and policy framework is to be changed, the system of religious identification and conceptualisation of ‘Uzbek Muslim’ common identity will be difficult to change overnight as it is based on social and cultural norms which dictate certain hierarchies in the majority Muslim community. The recent expansion of freedoms for the open practice of Islam under President Mirziyoyev’s government has led to increased religiosity and more radical expressions of Islam in offline and online spaces in the discourses of both government officials and religious leaders (Pikulicka-Wilczewska 2021). This may further exacerbate oppression against minority ethnoreligious groups such as Uzbek ethnic JWs and lead to increased religious tensions and conflicts at the family, community, and society level.

So far, we have discussed how non-Muslim religious identity on top of Uzbek ethnic identity may result in discriminatory and exclusionary attitudes and practices, both from the dominant religious group and the state. What is the impact of further intersecting layers of identity, such as disability, to ethnicity and religious beliefs? This paper explores how

¹⁰ As of 20 May 2021, no further updates were available on this draft law.

converted deaf Uzbek Jews navigate these complexities in the majority Muslim community. We will firstly need to locate deaf and hard-of-hearing people in the specific context of Uzbekistan in order to understand their vulnerability due to discrimination and segregation on the basis of disability.

3 Deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Uzbekistan

By the end of 2019, the total number of registered people with disabilities in Uzbekistan amounted to 693,900 people (Gender Statistics of Uzbekistan 2019). Although about 15 per cent of the world population have disabilities and about 80 per cent of them are living in developing countries (World Health Organization and World Bank 2011), only about 2 per cent of the total population of Uzbekistan are officially reported to have disabilities, suggesting that there are many more people who have disabilities than are reported. The government does not provide data disaggregated by types of impairments and the only available data on the number of people with hearing impairments comes from the Society of the Deaf of Uzbekistan, which is a leading non-government non-profit organisation (NGO) in the country.

As of 2019, 21,212 people with hearing impairments, including adults and children, were registered by the Society of the Deaf. This number also includes about 5,000 deaf and hard-of-hearing children studying at specialised boarding schools across Uzbekistan. However, there could be many people with hearing impairments who have not yet registered with the Society of the Deaf or obtained official disability status, which would make them eligible to receive state-guaranteed social benefits.

During Soviet times, Uzbek deaf communities were segregated into specific areas within large cities which were referred to in the vernacular as 'towns of the deaf' (*gorodok glukhikh*). The Society of the Deaf, which functioned under the Ministry of Social Welfare of the USSR, ran sheltered workshops called training and production enterprises (TPEs) where deaf and hard-of-hearing people could receive vocational training and be employed. This segregated model of employment worked on account of the Soviet government support and protection of these enterprises by granting a monopoly status to produce certain types of goods and through state orders.

Compared to the rest of the non-disabled population and enterprises, the TPEs of the deaf took advantage of their monopoly status and were profitable. The entire infrastructure was

built near these specialised factories, including residential buildings and a dormitory for deaf workers, a cultural and sports hall for leisure activities. As a result, the whole area turned into a small town within a city where a segregated deaf community lived and communicated with each other in sign language as it was on Martha's Vineyard, an island in the US with a high prevalence of hereditary deafness, described in detail by Groce (1988). However, unlike the biological reasons for the large concentration of deaf people on Martha's Vineyard, the 'town of the deaf' was the result of the Soviet disability policy of segregation, which was probably implemented with good intentions for the convenience of the deaf people who were located in residential areas built around the TPE infrastructure. Nevertheless, the segregated deaf community faced difficulties integrating into the mainstream non-deaf society, which has heavily affected their wellbeing.

After Uzbekistan gained its independence, the new government initiated the transition from the centrally planned communist economy to a market economy and democracy. The Society of the Deaf turned into an NGO and its enterprises gradually went bankrupt without the state support and privileged status enjoyed in Soviet times. As a result, the majority of deaf and hard-of-hearing people lost their jobs at the sheltered workshops and the segregated model of employment proved to be ineffective in the new realities of Uzbekistan. Currently, only ten training and production enterprises are left across the country, which employ only about 240–250 people with hearing impairments across the country (Yusupov 2019).

The Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations of Uzbekistan states that out of 162,200 'employable' people with disabilities, only 21,100 were officially employed in 2020, which is only about 6 per cent of all registered people with disabilities of working age (Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations of Uzbekistan 2020). The level of unemployment among deaf and hard-of-hearing people is difficult to measure due to the lack of data. As of 1 September 2020, childhood disability benefit amounted to 513,350 Uzbek soums per month (less than US\$50) which is not sufficient as it is about five times lower than the average monthly salary in Uzbekistan in 2020.¹¹ The inadequate social protection and the crisis with the TPEs has been a driver towards informal employment as men and women with hearing impairments have started seeking opportunities in underpaid and insecure employment in the streets of Tashkent. For instance, deaf men from all over Uzbekistan come to the capital city Tashkent and work as informal parking attendants at crowded

¹¹ The average salary in Uzbekistan in 2020 amounted to 2.66 million Uzbek soums (about US\$250) based on the official data provided by the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, <https://stat.uz/ru/press-tsentr/novosti-goskomstata/7523-srednemesyachnaya-nominalnaya-nachislennaya-zarabotnaya-plata-rabotnikov-predpriyatij-obladayushchikh-statusom-yuridicheskikh-lits>.

parking lots, selling Uzbekistani flags, key rings, and napkins at busy intersections, while deaf women earn a living in underground passages and other public places, offering paid weighing services to passers-by on their floor scales.

Low levels of specialised education, and a lack of social skills and communication barriers have excluded deaf people from the open labour market and the majority of Uzbek society which discriminates on the basis of disability. Purely medical understandings of deafness and its conflation with illness in post-Soviet Uzbekistan resulted in linguistic audism when the Uzbek government prohibited the use of Uzbek sign language (USL) at specialised schools. This severely affected the quality of education of children with hearing impairments who were required to learn lip-reading and vocalise.

In Uzbekistan, as in other post-Soviet countries, Russian sign language (RSL) is used and some evidence suggests that the sign language used by the Uzbek deaf community does not differ much from RSL, although there are some differences based on the local cultural context (Burkova and Varinova 2012). The reason is that USL has not been legally recognised in Uzbekistan and remains **'a means of interpersonal communication'** (GoU 2020, unpaginated) rather than a fully fledged official language that can be used in the process of education of deaf people.

Last year, the GoU adopted the draft decree 'On the further development of sign language used as a means of interpersonal communication' (Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan 2020), but the status of the USL remains unclear and limited to vernacular communication within the deaf community. The unclear legal status of USL and lack of government support for its development has led to the extremely low number of professionally trained sign language interpreters, while the Society of the Deaf remains the only organisation in the country which provides limited sign language interpretation services primarily for its members who regularly pay the membership fees.

Non-sign teaching methodologies have not been accessible for all deaf children and as a result, many of them were left behind by the state-guaranteed free education system. Nowadays, the majority of the Uzbek deaf community relies on signs rather than text to receive information from the hearing and speaking world (Akhliddinov and Yusupov 2019). The inadequate literacy opportunities and communication challenges, including writing and speaking experienced by deaf people, have further isolated them from society. The resultant deprivation in the capacity to digest textual information has made them less aware of existing legal documents to protect their legitimate rights and interests. Therefore, they have become less critically aware about their human rights due to lack of equal access to information that other non-deaf people have.

Freire (1970) described this condition as a '**culture of silence**', when the socially oppressed minority internalises the stigma and discrimination created and propagated by the majority hearing population. Following Freire's educational and social concepts, it can be argued that the many members of the Uzbek deaf community have become critically unconscious of their marginalised social and economic situation which takes its roots in the medicalisation of deafness and related explicit forms of audism in educational, social, and economic systems. The incoherence in the written language may also lead to negative stereotypes and prejudices in Uzbek society, which may incorrectly perceive deaf and hard-of-hearing people as those with learning impairments or '**mentally retarded**', to use the old and pejorative terminology, or the equally pejorative '**deaf and dumb**' which may be a cause for further marginalisation.

Written appeals are an important mode of grievances and complaints in Uzbekistan and the government institutions require applications in written formats. Thus, even if the new Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which came into force on 16 January 2021, provides the principle of non-discrimination on the basis of disability,¹² in practice, persons with hearing impairments find it challenging to enforce this legal and human rights framework. Importantly, their access to justice is hindered by the inaccessibility of the courts and lack of reasonable accommodation for deaf and hard-of-hearing people during judicial proceedings due to the insufficient number of sign language interpreters (UN Human Rights Council 2020). Uzbekistan remains one of the few countries in the world which has not yet ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, although it was signed in 2009.

To sum up, it can be said that deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Uzbekistan experience attitudinal and environmental barriers and are deprived of their citizenship rights to equal participation in the social, economic, political, and cultural spheres of contemporary Uzbek society. Non-recognition of Uzbek sign language as a natural and fully fledged language of the minority deaf community has led to the underdevelopment of interpretation services available to them and the degradation of their education.

Arrangements made during the Soviet era have resulted in the Uzbek deaf community being ghettoised in 'towns of the deaf' and they have been subject to segregation in education, employment, culture, and life in general. They lack social and communication skills that are perceived to be required to be included in broader society. As a result, the Uzbek deaf community lack '**critical consciousness**' (Freire 1970: 9) and accept their marginalised situation as a 'normal condition' while trying to find livelihood opportunities

¹² Article 4, basic principles of ensuring the rights of persons with disabilities (GoU 2020).

in the informal sector. What happens when on top of their existing deaf identity, another intersecting factor, such as minority Christian faith, is added as an additional layer? The following sections explore this complex situation.

4 Methodology

As part of my PhD research at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Tashkent in 2018–19 to explore the social exclusion and marginalisation of people with physical, hearing, visual, and learning disabilities in Uzbekistan. Tashkent is the capital of Uzbekistan and the most populous city in Central Asia, with a population of about 2.6 million people in 2020.¹³

4.1 Participant observation with persons with sensory impairments

Participant observation was used as the main method of collecting data by ‘hanging out’ with blind and visually impaired, deaf, and hard-of-hearing people in Tashkent. My field sites were mainly the small segregated ‘towns of the blind’ and ‘towns of the deaf’ in the Mirabad, Chilanzar, and Olmazor districts of the city as well as local *mahalla* communities, charity events, and so forth. My fieldwork coincided with the start of the project on Muslim religious education and raising the awareness of deaf and blind people about Islam¹⁴ which has been implemented by the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan (MBU) and the city *hokimiyat* (administration) since early 2018. I had the opportunity to participate in weekly meetings and various religious events with deaf and blind people at mosques and on the premises of the Society of the Blind.

Interestingly, such religious meetings were organised twice a week on Wednesdays and Sunday mornings with the deaf community and only once a week with the blind community at the Palace of Culture of the Blind under the Tashkent City branch of the Society of the Blind of Uzbekistan. As far as I understood, the reason why the MBU organised more religious meetings with the deaf community is that compared to the blind community, the former have had less opportunities to access both religious and secular education and therefore more attention has been paid to deaf people.

¹³ According to the official data provided by the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on statistics, <https://stat.uz/en/official-statistics/demography>.

¹⁴ Sunni Islam of the Hanafi School of Law is practised by the majority Muslim community in Uzbekistan.

Another hypothesis is that deaf people have been more prone to conversion to JW than blind people and taking into consideration the aim of the MBU's project, it was logical to put more effort into the deaf community rather than the blind community, which has already 'shaped an immunity' against JW.

Based on my weekly observations during these meetings and other public religious events, I managed to write extensive field notes on my daily reflections from interaction with people with hearing and visual impairments. In addition to participant observation, I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants with disabilities of these meetings, religious figures (e.g. imams of mosques, female imams '*otin-oyi*'), and government officials from the city administration. Moreover, I conducted virtual ethnography through social media, including Telegram, Facebook, the website of the MBU, and other religious institutions, while additional online data were collected from online conversations, discussions, media articles, and online visual material on disability and religious issues.

4.2 Positionality

I do not identify myself as a person with a disability or with a hearing impairment. Moreover, I do not speak Russian sign language (RSL) or Uzbek sign language (USL). I am originally from Tashkent and hold citizenship of Uzbekistan. My passport says that I am an 'ethnic Uzbek', although I believe that 'ethnicity' is a socially and politically constructed phenomenon that has been formed historically. Concerning my religious beliefs, I recognise myself as a 'nominal', 'cultural', or 'non-practising' Muslim (Sunni) and in favour in secularism, although I try to observe some religious requirements. Unlike many of the research participants with sensory impairments who belong to the lower-middle-income category, I identify myself as upper-middle-income class in the context of Uzbekistan.

Since October 2013, I have worked in the field of disability and inclusion in the country, both through grass-roots development practice and academic research. Throughout the research fieldwork, I tried to be reflexive about my positionality (Bolton and Delderfield 2018) as a male participant observer without any disability and I acknowledge that my identity might have influenced what stands out as research findings in this working paper. In the early stages of the ethnographic fieldwork, I felt myself to be more of an outsider and my inability to communicate in USL further exacerbated this as I had to rely on sign language interpreters hired by the MBU during the religious meetings with participants with hearing impairments. However, as I spent more time with the deaf Muslim community, my outsider positionality shifted, and I found myself somewhere on a continuum between complete observer (outsider) and complete participant (insider)

(Hammersley and Atkinson 2019) depending on various situations and contexts encountered in the field.

Importantly, my secular religious identity and being a so-called 'cultural Muslim' provided me with the opportunity to look at the collected ethnographic data through the prism of impartiality and respect of individual choices when it comes to religion. On the contrary, I believe that if I were a researcher with conservative Islamic beliefs, this would probably bring another subjective lens onto the research and interpretation of FoRB. It should also be noted that I became more of a practising Muslim after participating in the religious meetings and events and learned more about Islam. Interestingly, my attempts to use USL to learn more about Islam moved me closer to the insider position on the positionality continuum, and I managed to build a relationship of trust with both the participants with disabilities and the MBU who organised the religious events.

4.3 Data analysis

The collected interview data were transcribed in Uzbek and based on my jottings from two summer fieldworks, I produced several pieces of initial free-writing on the key themes that emerged in the field related, among other themes, to Islamic perceptions of disability. The qualitative interview transcripts, ethnographic free-writing, and secondary online data from the websites, and social media of the Islamic religious institutions constituted raw data that were imported into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 (Bazeley and Jackson 2013). For instance, 280 posts published by the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan and other Islamic religious institutions during the period from 2014 to 2020 were imported into NVivo using a web-browser extension NCapture. The collected textual and visual data, including photos and videos, were all coded in NVivo 12.

I applied **thematic analysis**, which is 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79) through an inductive (bottom-up) approach to coding. I followed the recursive phases of thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarising myself with my data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report.

5 Findings

One of the key findings from my ethnographic fieldwork in Tashkent was that people with disabilities, particularly those belonging to ghettoised deaf communities, became a field

of contestation between the dominant Muslim religious group and the minority group JW. Deaf Uzbek people are initially recognised as ‘Muslims by birth’ due to the existing ‘Uzbek Muslim’ identification system deeply rooted in the cultural, religious, and social norms which were discussed in Section 2 on the religious context of Uzbekistan. The findings below show how intersecting identities based on disability, ethnicity, and religion in the complex context of post-Soviet Uzbekistan impact the wellbeing of deaf Uzbek Jehovah’s Witnesses and increase their exclusion and marginalisation by adding layers of stigma and discrimination based on multiple intersectional factors.

5.1 ‘Muslims lost in the world of silence’

State-promoted audism in the specialised education system has negatively impacted on the social participation and economic inclusion of deaf and hard-of-hearing Uzbek communities in Tashkent. They found themselves in a liminal space where they neither could be identified as equal ethnic Uzbeks, nor practising Muslims. Due to reduced access to information and communication barriers, they were segregated and excluded both by society and the dominant Muslim religious community. Based on the findings from the fieldwork, it became evident that many deaf people in Uzbekistan do not consider themselves as persons with disabilities as compared to those with physical or visual impairments. One deaf woman expressed her anger about being marginalised in the following way:

Why does society reject us? Why does society not accept us? Why do they not employ us? We are able-bodied but only deprived of the ability to speak. This is how Allah is challenging us. Why do you not give us jobs?¹⁵

Therefore, the information vacuum of persons with hearing impairments was filled with the religious content promoted by the JW group. In times of social isolation and economic hardships, the religious doctrine and practices of JW in Uzbekistan seemed to be the most consistent with the state of minds and souls of deaf Uzbek communities. As one deaf Uzbek man who was converted to the JW professed:

Since I was young, I kept asking myself, whether I chose the right thing to do. Because I am a Muslim, I have to respect my religion [Sunni Islam] and learn more about it. Why do we go to church while most of our country is Muslim? Despite the fact that there were enough mosques at the time, some of the

¹⁵ Participant observation during a religious meeting with deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Tashkent, August 2018.

Muslims like me were attending church. Because in that church the situation was different, and [deaf] people like us felt that we were being 'heard'.

(Akhliiddinov 2018, unpaginated, author's emphasis)

Christian missionary groups such as JW attracted deaf and hearing-impaired people to their churches by providing reasonable accommodation in the form of simultaneous USL interpretation, and religious texts in accessible and easy-read formats during the religious meetings and activities. Thus, the excluded deaf Uzbek community was '**heard**' by the JW community which treated them as equals, listened with attention to their concerns, and probably offered material support. In other words, deaf people were included and socialised in the minority religious community of JW where sermons and religious information were delivered in their native language.

However, the majority Muslim community, the authorities of the city administration, and even the Society of the Deaf showed intolerance to the new religious beliefs of some members of the deaf Uzbek community, which eventually led to the deprivation of FoRB enshrined in the Constitution and the national legislation of Uzbekistan. The Cultural Centre for the Deaf of Tashkent City came up with the initiative to start a project on Islamic religious education of the deaf community to bring back the 'lost Muslims'.

The director of the Centre, a hard-of-hearing woman Guzal Shodieva, reported that she was trying to fight against the '**sect**' and '**missionaries**' for a long time but was not able to implement the project due the restrictions on freedom of association and conscience that were in place during the authoritarian rule of the first president, Islam Karimov. The reforms in the religious sphere introduced by the new president, Mirziyoyev, allowed the start of the project in early 2018 in partnership with the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan and the Tashkent City *hokimiyat* (administration) under the close supervision of the Committee of Religious Affairs.

Both the religious and secular authorities who belong to the majority Uzbek Muslim community perceived FoRB through their own perspective of a dominant religious group. As one state official reported in a private interview, 'regardless of the fact that we live in a democratic state we [Uzbek ethnic people] should not lose our Muslimness'. Therefore, the main focus of the project was directed towards reinstating the Uzbek Muslim identity and bringing 'lost souls' back to Islam. With this narrow approach, the MBU framed alternative religious beliefs as '**missionary work**' and '**proselytism**' and they are considered the biggest threat to an Uzbek cultural and religious identity and the nation's overall 'spiritual security'. The MBU defines missionary work as 'the propagation of another religion among peoples who believe in one religion' (Narzullaev 2018, unpaginated).

According to official sources of the MBU, missionary work is mainly specific to Christianity and it has been carried out since Christianity was declared the state religion in the Byzantine Empire. The pinnacle of missionary activity is proselytism – ‘the practice of forcing a citizen who directly believes in any religion to renounce his or her religion and convert to another religion’ (*ibid.*). The MBU official webpage mentions that in the first years of Uzbekistan’s independence, Christian missionaries were ‘legally registered under the guise of democracy, built dozens of local churches and began their black work aimed at further destabilising our country’ (*ibid.*). The official position of the dominant Islamic group was to try to politicise missionary work as if it were part of a covert geopolitical manipulation to put the sovereignty of independent Uzbekistan in danger:

It was more important to them [missionaries] to expel us from Islam than to convert us to another religion. This is because they know very well that the ‘sects’ they preach are false and cannot compete with Islam in any way.

(*ibid.*)

In the view of the majority Muslim community, deaf and hard-of-hearing people are easy prey for missionary outreach and the unscrupulous activities of JW’s who are exploiting the disadvantaged members of the deaf community with deceptive purpose. In other words, in the eyes of the Muslim majority, deaf people are incapable of making a conscious and informed decision to convert to another religion. The overprotectiveness of the dominant ethnoreligious group results in pressure being exerted on the converted deaf Uzbek JW to abandon their new faith and return back to their Islamic roots:

Their purpose is to break the hearts of our people with the same traditions and spiritual history, weaken us, split us and put various political and economic pressures not to allow us to live on our own while our ancestors have been Muslims for a thousand years, and today’s generation, who have believed in this religion [Sunni Islam] for all their lives.

(*ibid.*)

Therefore, the primary aim of the Muslim religious education project carried out by the MBU served this purpose by making Islamic beliefs and teachings more accessible for the ghettoised deaf and hard-of-hearing community, rather than respecting their FoRB and including them in the community on an equal basis with other deaf Uzbek Muslims.

5.2 Spiritual deafness

The female imams (*otin-oyi*) who organised weekly religious meetings with the blind and deaf Uzbek communities at the mosques of Tashkent taught them the provisions of the Qur'an and *hadiths* with the use of sign language interpreters. In such meetings, the Islamic religious texts were used to 'unmask the malicious intent'¹⁶ of missionary groups such as the JWs. During one such meeting, the *otin-oyi* pointed out that missionaries have been using wrong interpretations of verses from the Qur'an in an attempt to discredit Islam in the eyes of deaf communities (Bozorboy qizi 2018b) and to show that deaf people were not needed in the Muslim community. A deaf man asked:

I was really frightened when I read the verse 18 of Surah al-Baqara in the Qur'an. Will there be no hidoyat (right path) for deaf and dumb?¹⁷ Could you please clarify this issue? I have iymon (faith) in my soul and my trust in Allah is strong, but I cannot understand this verse.¹⁸

The *otin-oyi* explained that verse 2:18 which reads as 'deaf, dumb, and blind: they will never return' (Abdel Haleem 2008: 5) has nothing to do with deaf or blind people and is addressed to *mushriklar*¹⁹ (idolaters). She made it clear that the verse is provided in a figurative way and was about *ma'naviy* (spiritual) deafness, dumbness, and blindness. The 'deafness' was used to illustrate that non-believers in Allah do not listen to the truth, their dumbness is that they do not speak the truth, and their blindness is that upon seeing the truth, they do not confirm it. Another verse from the same Surah al-Baqara was recited by the female imam:

Calling to disbelievers is like a herdsman calling to things that hear nothing but a shout and a cry: they are deaf, dumb, and they understand nothing (2:171).

(Abdel Haleem 2008: 19)

The representatives of the MBU argued that turning to Christian missionaries, deaf people became also 'spiritually deaf' (*ma'naviy kar*) and lost themselves (*o'zligini*), their 'Uzbekness', and 'Muslimness'. The collected online data from the website of the MBU also

¹⁶ Participant observation during a religious meeting with deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Tashkent, August 2018.

¹⁷ The original term used in the Uzbek language is *kar-soqov* (deaf and dumb).

¹⁸ Participant observation during a religious meeting with deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Tashkent, August 2018.

¹⁹ From the Arabic, it means a person who rejects *tawhid* and one who worships idols.

prove these words by stating that deaf people have been cut off from Uzbek society for a long time, and they have no understanding of Uzbek national values (*milliy qadriyatlar*) and Islam. In an online article (Narzullaev 2018), an imam mentioned Vatan (Homeland), Millat (Nation), and Imon-e'tiqod (Faith) as sacred concepts which cannot be replaced by anything. Thus, 'missionary work' and 'proselytism' were considered as the biggest threat to the spiritual security of an individual and the nation in general.

For this reason, the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan began putting all effort to 'rehabilitate (*sog'lomlashtirish*) the religious environment' (Muslim Board of Uzbekistan 2019, unpaginated) by organising spiritual enlightenment talks for the deaf community in sign language with the primary purpose of reinstating their Uzbek identity and bringing them back to Islam. Repentance and return to Islam became a prerequisite for the inclusion of deaf Uzbek Jehovah's Witnesses in the humanitarian work carried out by the MBU and the Public Charity Foundation 'Vaqf'. A '*vaqf*' is a charitable endowment created under Islamic law, and for the first time in the history of independent Uzbekistan, it was established in April 2018 according to the decree of the President of Uzbekistan (2018).

The MBU decides the mandate of the Vaqf Foundation and its functions also include provision of material and moral support for socially marginalised segments of the population such as people with disabilities (Vaqf n.d.). Their funding comes primarily from local donations in Uzbek soums via the charity boxes installed at the mosques and online payment systems. All the donations are separated based on their purposes including *xayriya* (ordinary charity); *vaqf*, *zakat*, *fitr*, and *ushr*, various campaigns, etc. Importantly, while carrying out its charitable activities, the Vaqf Foundation may also be guided by the considerations of helping primarily Uzbek Muslims, thus leaving behind those from minority religious groups.

As a result, deaf Uzbek Christians may also be excluded and deprived of the support provided by the majority Muslim society and Islamic institutions which may end up in multiple forms of stigma and discrimination based on the minority disability and religious identity. However, disrespect of the choice of faith by deaf and hard-of-hearing people explicitly violates their human rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It should not serve as the ground for further exclusion of persons with hearing impairments from the development and charity work carried out by the state and religious institutions, as well as organisations of people with disabilities.

5.3 The split in deaf society

Apart from the interfaith tensions between the dominant Muslim community and the minority group of converted deaf Uzbeks, exclusionary tendencies and conflicts were also observed within the deaf community itself, due to the complex intersection of a religious, ethnic, and disability identity. As described in Section 2, being Muslim in the local Uzbek context is associated with an adherence to social norms through the daily practice of customs and traditions around circumcision, marriage, and death which helps to build social networks and inclusion in the community (Louw 2018: 89). Therefore, complexities emerged when entire deaf families joined Christian missionary groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Multiple questions were raised by deaf communities as to whether it was lawful for a Muslim woman to live with her husband if he had converted to another religion. Deaf and hard-of-hearing women believed that their marriages (*nikoh*) broke up after they or their husbands joined the Jehovah's Witnesses. Therefore, after their return to Islam, upon recitation of a prayer (*kalima*) '*La Ilaha Illallah*', they immediately requested imams to remarry them for fear of ending up in Hell (*do'zax*). Moreover, intergenerational conflicts were on the rise among those who chose to be missionaries, particularly young people and their parents.

The collected ethnographic data show various intrahousehold tensions on the basis of religious identity emerged within the deaf communities. For example, when a father died as a Muslim, and his son being a converted JW, went against the community by saying that he would bury him in a Christian graveyard. In another case, a single mother knowing that her daughter was attending the JW church was embroiled in family strife, and could not set her back on 'the path of enlightenment' (*hidoyat yo'li*). Such a split caused religious tensions within the deaf community and the deaf families. It further undermined the limited efforts of the Society of the Deaf to unite deaf people in Uzbekistan and develop a common deaf community identity.

Unlike the 'Deaf' (with a capital 'D') in the US and the UK, where persons with hearing impairments historically developed a distinctive cultural identity, deaf people in Uzbekistan do not usually identify themselves as culturally Deaf. This can be related to audism and banning USL in the post-independence period which deprived deaf people of cultural identification and putting their 'Deaf' identity first. Moreover, the crisis of the segregated model of employment which once had served as the catalyst of the 'towns of the deaf' disintegrated the tight-knit deaf community established due to the legacy of Soviet disability policies.

It should be pointed out that without a collective deaf identity and agency, it is challenging to mobilise forces at the grass-roots level to fight against widespread discrimination on the basis of disability, to advocate for the legitimate rights and interests of persons with hearing impairments, and increase the quality of their lives. Moreover, as the deaf Uzbek JW converts were portrayed as victims of missionary groups who had become 'spiritually corrupt', this led to the discrimination and exclusion of deaf JWs by majority deaf Muslims.

5.4 Islamic institutions are becoming more accessible

Not all of our findings were negative. The intensification of accessible religious practices by the JW among deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Uzbekistan served as an impetus for the MBU to provide sign language interpretation and other forms of reasonable accommodation for them. For instance, the Joshua Project²⁰ has a separate webpage titled 'Deaf in Uzbekistan' which outlines that the Bible is not accessible for many deaf people in the country while the 'limited access to education makes learning a spoken language well enough to read scripture exceedingly difficult, and only a small percentage of Deaf people have access to scripture in a sign language.'²¹

For a long time, the deaf community has been excluded by mosques and other religious institutions due to their inaccessibility and non-provision of sign language interpretation in violation of the provisions of the 'Law on Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities'.²² Moreover, as citizens of Uzbekistan, they have been deprived of their constitutional right to practise any religion due to communication barriers and discrimination on the basis of disability. In their official publications, the MBU warned that the JW missionaries focus on people they consider to be materially and spiritually deprived, including members of families of mixed nationalities, those who had previously suffered from serious illness, loss, financial hardship, those who had never practised any religion, those who had come from correctional facilities, deaf people, and other marginalised groups.

Moreover, the MBU observed the efforts of Christian religious organisations to conduct prayers in local languages such as Uzbek and Russian by importing and distributing

²⁰ A Christian organisation based in Colorado Springs, US, who coordinate the work of missionary organisations to identify ethnic groups around the world with the fewest followers of evangelical Christianity. See www.joshuaproject.net/index.php.

²¹ Deaf in Uzbekistan, The Joshua Project, https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/19007/UZ.

²² Chapter 2. Creation of conditions for unimpeded access of persons with disabilities to social infrastructure facilities, use of transport, communications, and information of the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Social Protection of Persons with Disabilities No. ZRU-162, from 11 July 2008.

special religious literature in the country. For instance, since September 2006, the JW religious magazine *The Watchtower (Storojevaya bashnya)*, one of the main publications of the church, was first published in Uzbek and several attempts were made to smuggle it into the country. The MBU also mentioned how the JW representatives actively try to convert the local population by 'going from house to house openly preaching their religion as if only their religion is true and other religions are false' (Narzullaev 2018, unpaginated).

Thus, marginalised groups became a field of contestation between the dominant Muslim community and the Christian missionaries. This motivated the start of the project on religious education and enlightenment of the deaf community by providing sign language interpretation and allocating charity through the newly established Vaqf Foundation. On 23 November 2018, for the first time in the history of Uzbekistan, Juma (Muslims' Friday sermon), was organised with online sign language interpretation at Kokcha mosque in Tashkent. The MBU took seriously the issue of accessibility of its religious content for deaf people and provided the following statistics:

*Although there are 23,000 deaf people in Uzbekistan, there are only 50 sign language interpreters available for them. There is a need for at least 300 such interpreters. **Currently, there is a great need for sign language interpreters at mosques.***

(Kun.uz 2018, unpaginated, author's emphasis)

Starting from 1 February 2019, simultaneous sign language interpretations were organised at 25 mosques across the country and the MBU plans to introduce sign language in stages in each region of Uzbekistan. The MBU reported that some people with disabilities 'fell into the trap of missionaries because of their lack of religious knowledge' (Bozorboy qizi 2018a). Therefore, the measures have been taken to find solutions to this problem by making Islamic religious institutions and knowledge accessible to them.

The dominant Muslim community is trying to replicate the strategies used by the Jehovah's Witnesses by providing charitable assistance to organisations and institutions dealing with orphans, the elderly, and people with disabilities, distributing financial support to the poor, and the provision of food to the people who need it, and the organisation of medical care for them, in partnership with the Vaqf Foundation. Such inclusive practices and tendencies observed among the Muslim communities are worth acknowledgement but the motive behind these steps towards accessibility were to bring back the 'lost souls' rather than include them equally in society by allowing freedom of religion and belief.

The female imams (*otin-oyi*) who organised the religious meetings with the deaf community attempted to adapt the local sign language so that it would comply with the ideals of 'Uzbekness' and 'Muslimness'. For instance, when greeting deaf people, the *otin-oyi* put both her hands on her chest articulating with lips: '*Assalomu alaykum*' (a Muslim greeting) and asked deaf participants not to abstain from the Russian sign '*Zdravstvuyte*' (a common greeting in Russian). Moreover, the female imam believed that deaf participants should try to speak so that the muscles of their tongues would not stiffen. Therefore, she asked them to repeat several times the Islamic prayer: '*La ilaha illallah*.' She believed that when one repeats this *kalima*, all the muscles around the tongue work and when they are activated, Allah will definitely bless their tongues with movement and speech in the end.

In this combination of religious and medical views on disability, hearing and/or speech impairments are viewed as physical deficiencies that should and/or can be 'cured' or 'overcome' through regular curative prayers. It can be defined as a 'religious audism' which looks at deafness as something to be fixed rather than celebrated and accepted as a human diversity. For instance, the deaf participants of the Muslim religious meetings were encouraged to learn by heart all the 99 names of Allah and take part in the religious recitation competition called Asma-ul Husna. The female imam motivated participants by providing the case of deaf people who had not been able to speak and started miraculously pronouncing the names of God. Thus, it was recommended to repeat '*La ilaha illallah*' every day after *namoz* (prayer) and try to emit sound or vocalise (*ovoz chiqarish*) during prayers (*duo*) and then if Allah wills, they will organise Qur'an competitions with deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

6 Conclusion

Deaf and hard-of-hearing people in Uzbekistan were already pushed to the margins of Uzbek society due to the widespread discrimination on the basis of disability, degradation of the specialised education and employment systems inherited from the Soviet Union, and a lack of sign language interpretation services and associated communication barriers. As a result, the deaf community in Tashkent has been segregated and ghettoised, both by the state and society. Due to the barriers to communication and the established information vacuum, persons with hearing impairments have found themselves in a liminal position and have been left behind in both the official data, state social protection policies, and even by Islamic institutions.

Therefore, some deaf Uzbek people have found refuge in minority Christian missionary groups such as JW, who were much open to them and provided more opportunities for their livelihoods and moral support. At the same time, the dominant Islamic institutions remained largely inaccessible in terms of reasonable accommodation (e.g. sign language interpretation) and exclusionary attitudes of the mosques as well as state and society in general. Becoming a deaf Uzbek JW added on layers of marginalisation and exclusion on the basis of multiple intersecting identities which conflicted with the established system of 'Uzbek Muslim' identification rooted in the social and cultural norms passed down from generation to generation since the Soviet era.

Although Uzbekistan's Constitution and the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations provides for FoRB, the conversion of deaf Uzbek people by JWs was perceived by the MBU as a threat to the 'spiritual security' of the majority Uzbek ethnic and Muslim population. The Islamic clergy stated that the deaf communities fell into the trap of the missionaries and went astray in exchange for financial support, food, gifts, and livelihood opportunities.

As a result, in early 2018, the MBU initiated its own religious outreach and awareness-raising project among the deaf and blind communities in Tashkent and other regions. The Muslim community believed that the low level of both secular and religious education made them an easy target to conversion by missionary groups. Although converted deaf people received access to the resources of JW, they did not receive the same treatment by the MBU, which made the repentance and return back to Islam a prerequisite to be included in the development and charity work carried out in partnership with the newly established 'Vaqf' Public Charity Foundation.

Moreover, deaf Uzbek JWs were rejected by deaf Uzbek Muslims, which led to intrahousehold or intracommunity conflicts arising on the basis of belonging to a certain faith. Marriages broke up between deaf Muslims and converted JW deaf partners, and intergenerational conflicts emerged between the younger generation which joined missionary groups and the elderly deaf Muslims. Such religious tensions within an already vulnerable and marginalised deaf community inhibited the formation of a common deaf identity and collective agency to advocate for their legitimate rights and interests. Deaf and hard-of-hearing citizens' choice to join JW was perceived by the dominant Islamic and state discourse as not being an informed choice due to their lack of Islamic religious knowledge.

However, the MBU and the state should bear the sole responsibility for not providing reasonable accommodation at mosques and other religious institutions and not allowing

the use of USL in the education of deaf and hard-of-hearing children. The active missionary work of JW targeting deaf and other marginalised layers of the population in Uzbekistan served as an impetus from the Muslim community to become more accessible and inclusive in terms of the religious practice and dissemination of Islamic knowledge.

However, it is argued that rather than respecting the FoRB of the deaf Uzbek converts, the Muslim majority put pressure on them so that they would repudiate their religious beliefs and return to the religion of ethnic Uzbeks. Finally, resorting to the practices of 'religious audism', the representatives of the MBU intervened in the formation of a cultural Deaf identity and the native development of USL. By looking at deafness through the prism of religious and medical models, the MBU tried to promote the discourses of overcoming hearing and/or speech impairment to put the 'Uzbek Muslim' identification first, rather than nurturing the unique Deaf identification in the context of post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

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