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'Normalization of Violence' in Public Discourses: Implications for Mental Health of Religious Minorities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Dr. Shakeel Ahmed
Postdoctoral Scholar, Islamic Research Institute, Islamic International University Islamabad and Associate Professor of Social Work, University of Peshawar, Pakistan

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Corresponding Author:
Dr. Shakeel Ahmed
Email: shakeel@uop.edu.pk

Abstract: *This study is the second phase of a postdoctoral research project on the normalization of violence in public discourses, conducted at the Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University Islamabad. Religious minorities live under constant threat of prejudice and discrimination. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP thereafter), the target killing of Sikh religious minorities spark a public discussion on the rights of religious minorities and how they could survive in an apparent conservative society of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Very few studies have focused on the mental health of religious minorities in KP. This study asked the following questions: How does normalization of violence in public discourse affect the lives of religious minorities? What coping strategies are used by religious minorities to deal with normalization of violence in public discourse? This qualitative study employed interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with members of Sikh, Hindu, Christian, Bahai, and Kalasha communities in Peshawar. Findings indicate that religious minorities experience minority stress and generalized fear, leading to coping mechanisms such as silence and assimilation.*

Introduction

Minorities, across the world, live in a compromised situation. Minority is a smaller number or part (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). It is the opposite of the majority. In general, a minority is any group of people who constitute less than half of the population of a geographical entity. In social sciences, minority is "any category of people distinguished by physical or cultural difference that a society sets apart and subordinates" (Macionis, 2012:322). Or it is "any small group in society that is different from the rest because of their race, religion, or political beliefs, or a person who belongs to such a group" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). Minority status can be based on race, ethnicity, religion, or a combination of two or three of them. Some social scientists argue that minority status could also be based on one's gender. Sociologists identify two distinctive characteristics of minorities: distinctive identity and subordination. The distinctive identity may be based on language, race, physical characteristics, religious beliefs, and or any other cultural or physical traits. The subordinate status of minorities renders them to have lower incomes, lower occupational prestige, and limited schooling. Given these two characteristics, then, minority group does not necessarily have to be lower in number. In South Africa, for example, Black population is higher in number but is quite disadvantaged in terms of job prestige, political power,

and other opportunities. In Colonial India, the British were lower in number compared to native Indians, but Indians were in sub-ordinate position and disempowered. Thus, the defining features of minority groups are subordination and disempowerment.

In Pakistan, a significant majority of the population, 97%, is Muslim while only 03% are non-Muslims. Thus, religiously, non-Muslims are a minority group. Within non-Muslims, there are Christians, Hindus, Sikh, and followers of other religions. The 7th Census of Pakistan conducted in 2017 list eight (8) different religious groups: Muslims, Christians, Hindu Jati, Qadiani, Sikh, Parsi, Scheduled Castes[1], and others (7th Census of Pakistan, 2017). Christians constitute the largest minority population (38%) followed by Hindu Jati (44%), scheduled castes (15%), Qadiani and others (2%). Christian, Hindu, Sikh, and Qadiani minorities dominates the public discourse and are more visible compared to Parsi, scheduled castes, and others. Geographically, religious minorities pre-dominantly reside in urban areas. However, in Sindh, the Hindu population mostly resides in rural Thar Desert.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 99.6 populations is Muslim meaning that there is a highly lower religious minority population. Within the religious minority in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Christian make-up over 87% of the religious minority group followed by 4% Hindus, 3% Sikhs and 6% others. Within the others category in KP, Kalasha as an ethnic and religious minority is also included (7th National Census 2017, 2023: Table 9).

Being an Islamic Republic, the Constitution of Pakistan 1973 does provide some space for minorities. Although, the Constitution does not explicitly distinguish between ethnic and religious minorities, the Preamble of the Constitution of Pakistan 1973 provides for measures to be taken for minorities to "freely profess and practice their religion and develop their culture". This statement can be divided into two parts. 'Freely profess and practice their religion' and 'develop their culture'. 'Freely profess and practice their religion' indicates that here religious minority group is addressed while 'develop their culture' indicates that here ethnic minority is addressed. Article 36 of the Constitution exclusively provides for measures regarding safeguarding the rights of minorities and their due representation at Federal and Provincial level. However, it does not distinguish between religious and/or ethnic minority.

Minorities, like in other parts of the world, also experience prejudice, a rigid and unfair generalization, and discrimination, unequal treatment in Pakistan. Daily *Dawn*, a leading newspaper in Pakistan, listed 21 incidents of violence against religious minority groups in Pakistan during the period August 2022-2023 (Rehan, Fazal & Irfan, 2023). Internationally, Pakistan is put at lower levels of the religious freedom spectrum. US Commission on International Religious Freedom put Pakistan as a 'country of particular concern' along with India, Afghanistan, and many other countries (US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2025). During post 9/11 terrorism, multiple seminaries of religious minorities were attacked either by terrorist groups or by angry mobs. For example, in 2013, a Christian Church was attacked in Peshawar resulting in a death toll of 80 people (Shirazi, 2013). In 2015, another church was attacked in Lahore resulting in a death toll of 14 people (Khalil, 2025). In 2014, a Christian couple in Qasur district of Punjab was killed and their bodies burned in the brick kilns where they worked on charges of alleged blasphemy of the Holy Quran (BBC, 2014). Persons from Sikh community were also targeted by extremist terrorist groups (AP News, 2023). The 'forced conversion' issue, although not supported by any empirical study but by NGO reports, of scheduled caste Hindu girls in Sindh get more media and international attention (Hussain, 2021). A quick search on Google video search option with the string "talk shows on religious minority in Pakistan" provides 37,700 search results. The same string for India provides 67,000 search results.

[1] Scheduled castes are 32 lower-level Hindu castes in Pakistan November 1957 Presidential ordinance of Pakistan

Such a discourse in national and international media, NGO reports, human rights forums, social media messages, and other materials create a kind of situation that is known to social scientists as a 'discursive field' that portrays 'normalization of violence' against religious minorities. The discourse developed by such narratives indicates that violence against religious minorities is a normal practice in Pakistan. This, in turn, impacts the mental health of religious minorities and creates concern for researchers and people in authority. Mental health, according to WHO (2024), is "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community."

WHO indicates that unfavourable cultural environment, exposure to violence, and inequality are risk factors for mental health conditions. We believe that much of the prejudice and discrimination against religious minorities stem from the public discourse, "the communication that shapes (or challenges) our shared beliefs and norms as a society" (Indiana University, 2024). This communication could be in varying shapes: written or verbal speeches, essays, posters, dramas, films, TV reports, talk shows, storytelling, songs, graffiti, novels, slogans, and others (discursive field). The public discourse creates a discursive field for 'normalization of violence' against religious minorities. in this study, we were interested in finding out how the religious minorities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa cope with the mental health issues given the 'normalization of violence' in public discourse.

Minorities, discrimination, and violence

One study in the US found religious discrimination against minorities. Scheitle & Ecklund (2020) found that Muslim and Jewish minorities face much greater level of interpersonal hostility, organizational discrimination, and violent victimization due to their religion. Despite being the world's most powerful nation, the United States, known for its significant diversity within its upper legislative chamber, is expected to uphold principles of equality and non-discrimination. However, research suggests that systemic biases and historical inequalities continue to influence political representation and decision-making processes (Smith, 2020; Jones & Williams, 2021). Given Pakistan's economic challenges and the fragility of its democratic institutions, it is not an exception to the global trends where systemic inequalities and governance issues persist, influencing political representation and policymaking (Ahmed & Khan, 2020; Rizvi, 2021). In Pakistan, Hindu and Sikh minorities face more social discrimination as compared to the Christian minority (Ali & Ahmad, 2022). Christians, on the other hand, faced comparatively higher level of violence from extremist groups as they were perceived to be allies and facilitators of the Christian West in Pakistan (Rais, 2007).

Basedau, Fox, Pierskalla, Strüver, and Vüllers (2017) criticized the traditional understanding of religious discrimination and violence. Their study did not focus on violence directed against religious minorities but rather violent incidents between religious minority and majority. They collected data from 1990 to 2008 to study the pattern of religious discrimination and violence. They found near to no link between religious discrimination and violence. This means that the political, economic, and historical factors mediate this relationship—i.e., discrimination alone does not cause violence, but social instability, political rhetoric, and economic inequality can exacerbate it.

Reporting data from different countries around the world on religious minorities, they found no conflict between religious minorities and majority in 14 out of 18 developing countries. For instance, there are Buddhist and Christian religious minorities in China, Bahai in Iran, Christians in Kuwait, Buddhist and Christians in Maldives, Buddhist, Christians, Hindus, and Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia, Protestants and other Christians in Turkmenistan, and Protestants in Vietnam. However, no conflict has been reported during the study period. Conflicts did occur between religious minorities and majority in some countries

during the study period. For instance, Muslims in China, Qadianis in Pakistan, Animists and Christians in Sudan, and Christians in Uzbekistan (Basedau, Fox, Pierskalla, Strüver & Vüllers, 2017).

Table 1: Heavily discriminated religious minorities holding grievances and conflict involvement (1990-2008)

Table 5. Heavily discriminated religious minorities holding grievances and conflict involvement, 1990–2008

Country	Minority	Percentage of population	Conflict involvement (years)
China	Buddhists	8.4%	None
China	Chinese religions	28%	None
China	Christians	7.2%	None
China	Muslims	1.5%	Yes (2004)
Iran	Bahai	0.5%	None
Kuwait	Christians	4%	None
Maldives	Buddhists	0.7%	None
Maldives	Christians	0.1%	None
Pakistan	Ahmadi	0.3%	Yes (1990–2008)
Saudi Arabia	Buddhists	0.25%	None
Saudi Arabia	Christians	4%	None
Saudi Arabia	Hindus	1%	None
Saudi Arabia	Shiite Muslims	4%	None
Sudan	Animists	20%	Yes (1990–2008)
Sudan	Christians	10%	Yes (1990–2008)
Turkmenistan	Protestants	0.1%	None
Turkmenistan	Other Christians	1.7%	None
Uzbekistan	Christians	1.7%	Yes (1991, 1999–2000, 2004)
Vietnam	Protestants	1.5%	None

Notes: Authors' compilation. The table features countries with a discrimination index of at least 20 according to Fox; minority groups also have to hold grievances at least in one year; conflict involvement indicates the year after being discriminated against and holding grievances. Correlation between percentage of population and years of conflict involvement 0.29; without Chinese minorities 0.66.

Haleem (2020) posits that "violence is normalized when it is no longer viewed as immoral or unconscionable, but as instead moral and ordinary." She asserts that collective violence is normalized through narrative (or for our current study, we call it public discourse) which consists of language of violence and iconography. Language of violence is used for 'otherization' and manufacturing enemies. Others are portrayed as filthy, evil, and dangerous. Others are considered 'inferior' and self 'superior' in some sense. Iconography, a field of arts, is used to manufacture consent for violence. This normalization also passes through a process. According to Irum Haleem, the process of 'normalization of violence', occurs in three stages: moralization, legalization, and popularization.

1. Moralize: religious morality, secular morality (standard operating procedure, popular majority, will of the people) (rational, value-based, affectual, traditional, Weber idea.)
2. Legalize: if something is moral, it should be legal. If something is legal, it should be moral.
3. Popularize: through traditional media, speeches, declarations, and iconography.

A good anecdote could be the condition of Muslims in Western Democracies after 9/11. Muslims religious minorities in Western democracies faced higher level of discrimination and victimization of violent incidents after 9/11. The post 9/11 Western world created a public discourse against Muslims where Muslim Al-Qaida was a global threat to the Western values and way of life. This created a discursive field where public discourse was highly antagonistic against Muslim religious minority. Moralization was achieved through both secular and religious means. Furthermore, many western

countries enacted legislations specifically targeting Muslim population. The same prejudice and discrimination were popularized through traditional media, films, speeches, talk shows, novels etc. the result was a social context where violence against Muslims religious minority was normalized.

Normalization of violence, religious minorities, and mental health

Studies on the impact of perceived religious discrimination on mental health are very rare. Mostly, discrimination-based studies focus on racial or ethnic discrimination and their impact on mental health. Wu and Schimmele (2019), however, conducted a study on impact of perceived religious discrimination on mental health of religious minorities. Using self-reported mental health instrument on a sample of 27,104 participants, they report that perceived religious discrimination is harmful to mental health. Every and Perry (2020) found that perceived discrimination lowers self-esteem of Australian Muslims. Nuamana Suleman from Minority Rights Group (2022) asserted that "girls from minority religions who are educated outside of faith or community run schools are more vulnerable to violence and discrimination". Religious minorities in Pakistan have lower level of mental well-being (Shaukat, Ayub, & Tarar, 2021). In a qualitative study conducted by Jan Alam (2020) n religious minorities in Kohat and their life satisfaction, one of his respondents said that 'People from the religious minorities feel depressed when the extremist groups spread bias against them, and they are discriminated'. Participants from the study (Alam, 2020) perceive violence and threat to stem from certain 'extremist' groups. One of the interesting findings of the study was that 'minority groups, particularly Christian minorities, celebrate picnics more than any other group in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa'.

Conceptual Framework

Normalization of violence in public discourse against religious minorities	• Prejudice & Discrimination • Exposure to violent incidents • Exposure to discriminatory practices/events • Unfair treatment • Poor housing • Low-income jobs • Low occupational prestige • Lower level of education • Excluded schooling • Excluded interaction	Mental health Problems such as Fear Depression Low-self esteem Exclusion Silence

This conceptual framework is based on a preliminary review of literature and insights from religious minority communities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This conceptual framework indicates that prejudice and discrimination against religious minorities, more exposure to violent incident, unfair treatment, poor housing, low-income jobs, low occupational prestige, lower levels of education, excludes schooling and excluded interaction create mental health conditions for religious minorities in Pakistan.

Research Questions

With the framework in mind, the researcher developed the following research questions:

1. How does normalization of violence in public discourse affect the lives of religious minorities?
2. What coping strategies are used by religious minorities to deal with normalization of violence in public discourse?

Significance of the Study

Violence is an intricate and deeply rooted phenomenon that difficult to fully comprehend or resolve through a single framework. To address this complexity, the study employs a multi-faceted approach to explore the issue from diverse perspectives. Traditionally, such phenomena are often analysed through Western and historical paradigms, overshadowing local and indigenous perspectives—a lingering consequence of the colonization of literature and intellectual thought in Asian societies.

The distinctiveness of this research lies in its endeavor to understand the normalization of violence through a localized lens, drawing on the insights from Irm Haleem and Khurshid Singay. Previous studies on mob violence in Pakistan mostly focused on blasphemy. This study analyses one blasphemy case and another non-blasphemy case of mob-violence. This will provide a deeper understanding into the psychological and sociological constructs of mob-violence thereby filling a knowledge-gape in Pakistani literature.

Methodology

The methodology for this study is qualitative. Mental health is very rarely explored from qualitative lens. Most of the mental health studies are quantitative in nature based on huge sample size and statistical analysis. Very few studies utilized qualitative methods to explore mental health conditions. Frawley (2016) explored the mental health of college students from a qualitative perspective. One of the objectives of this study was "add to literature that challenges approaches to studying mental health that treat it as reified". This provided sufficient justification for qualitative methodology being employed in mental health research.

Alam (2020) explore life satisfaction, a mental health dimension, of religious minorities from a qualitative lens in Kohat district of Pakistan. Taking justification from Hall (1996) and Marin and Marin (1991) who recommend using qualitative method to study different aspects of minorities' life, Alam (2020) developed a 7Ps model of life satisfaction of religious minorities in Pakistan.

By similar logic, this study used qualitative designs. The reason was to capture the lived experiences of the religious minorities regarding discrimination, violence, and mental health. For this purpose, interviews were conducted with the representatives from Hindu, Christians, Sikh, Kalasha, Parsi, Kalasha, and Bahai faith. The study also involved one focused group discussion with the representatives of religious minorities in Peshawar.

The findings were thematically analysed. The results are discussed below.

Results and Discussion

1. Identity Issue: Fear of Otherizing

In general, the religious minorities do not project their identity outwardly. Except Sikh men, who wear a turban which indicates their religious identity, members of other minority groups do not project clear signs of religious identity in public. Wearing *shalwar-qamees* is a cultural dress where one cannot distinguish between a Muslim and non-Muslim. However, Hindus and Christians do have religious identification marks. Hindus, for example, wear *tilak* on their forehead. But in Peshawar, they do not wear tilak in public. One Hindu said:

> "If I put a *tilak* and walk in bazar, people will give me strange looks. If my wife put *sindur* and walk around, she will be given strange looks. This is our identity. But my life is in danger if I walk with open identity in bazar.

A Christian said

> "In Hassan Garhi (a place in Peshawar), a man named Francis (a Christian) lives. On his Bike, he put a sticker "*Yassoo Malik*" (Christ Lord). His landlord told him to take it out as he did not like it.

> At the end of the day, he was asked to leave the house and go somewhere else. So, this is the issue our identity creates for us.

Many social scientists argue that strength of one's identity depends about the status and position of the identity group in the society Hyber (2024) and on how 'bright' or 'blurred' the boundaries between the religious minority group and the majority society are" Alba (2005). In Pakistan, Sikh religious minority do not hide their identity while others do. The reason lies, amongst other factors, in the status and position of Sikh, Hindu, Christian, or other religious minority groups. Within religious minorities, Sikhs stand out. Sikh remained recent rulers of this region (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab). Most of the Sikh community members are traders or shopkeepers. Hindu and Christian minority groups, on the other hand, are engaged in traditionally low paying jobs. This apparent economic position of a religious minority also affects their social position and religious identity.

2. Stress experienced through 'Otherization' as a struggling Phenomena

The first theme that emerged from the data was stress of otherization in terms of global local connect. Minorities in Pakistan are majority in other countries. For example, Christians are a minority in Pakistan but are a majority in many other countries in the world particularly Western World. Hindus are a minority in Pakistan but a majority in India. Sikh are a minority in Pakistan but majority elsewhere. The participants reveal that much of the violence and discrimination directed against them is a result of incidents in other countries. for example, Muslims are in minority in India and there is a widespread discrimination and violence against Muslims in India. This has given a flavour to the public discourse to justify violence and discriminations as a reaction against Hindus in Pakistan. A Sikh participant said:

> "*Koch log hamare sath guftago mh kehte hyn Agar India mh minorities k sath aisa hota hy tov hume b Pakistan mh minorities k sath aisa krna chahye, ya, aisa kr sakte hyn*." [Urdu]. Trans: "some people that we talk to say during conversation or debate that if it (violence and discrimination) can happen in India against religious minorities, we should also do the same in Pakistan against religious minorities".

Similarly, a Bishop said:

> "*Dunya mh kahi b aisa waqya hota hy tov os ka result hame bughatna partha hy.*" [Urdu]. Trans: "if such incident (violence against Muslim) happens anywhere in the world, we (Christian minority) have to face its consequences (in Peshawar)."

Likewise, a Sikh leader said:

> *Jab India Pakistan is cricket match harta hy to Koch log hamare ghar k samne aa kr hawai firing krte hyn. K dekho hum ne Hinduo'n ko hara diya. Wo samajte hyn k hum Indian hhyn. Mh Indian nahi hon. Mh KP is hon.* [Urdu}. Trans: When India loses a match from Pakistan, there are few who come in front of our home and start aerial firing (a cultural phenomenon of celebrating victory or happy occasions). Look! We have defeated Hindus. They think we are Indians. I am not Indian. I am from KP.

The Hindus and Sikhs must constantly struggle with proving their loyalty to Pakistan. This sociological phenomena in KP arises from the fact that for general masses, Hindu and Sikh are the same. There is no difference. They think Sikhs are also Hindus. That's why, they are equated to each other. This constant otherization creates stress for religious minorities in KP. A Sikh said:

> *Jab mh twitter per koi post krta ho'n tov neechy log kia kehte hyn? Jao apne India. waha'n to tum azaad ho na.* [Urdu]. Trans: When I post something on Twitter, see what comments are coming? They say, go to India. You are free there.

Minority stress is experienced by a variety of minorities including sexual, racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. Research on minority stress corresponds to the findings of this study. A study by Ventriglio, Castaldelli-Maia, Torales, Chumakov, De Berardis, & Bhugra (2022) associate minority stress with 'higher level of psychosocial distress and mental illness among these vulnerable populations.' Parent, Brewster, Cook, & Harmon (2018) reported that stress is higher amongst those religious minorities who are open about their faith while it is lower amongst those who are silent.

3. Generalized Fear

Some of the religious minorities have been on the target list of religious extremist violent groups such as Daish. Amongst such minorities, Sikh are on the top. A Sikh man is easily identified by his attire. This might be one of the reasons that they were subject to easy target killing. For example, on September 30th, 2021, a well-known Sikh medicine practitioner, Hakeem Satnam Singh Khalsa, was shot dead in Peshawar (Sikh medicine practitioner shot dead in Pakistan's Peshawar, 2021). In May 2022, two Sikh shopkeepers were shot dead in the outskirts of Peshawar, the capital city of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Ashfaq, 2022). In April 2023, another Sikh shopkeeper was shot dead by a motorcyclist (Sikh trader shot dead in Peshawar, 2023). In June 2023, there were two target killings of Sikh traders within 48 hours (1 dead in second attack on Sikhs within 48 hours, 2023). Given the wave of terrorism in Pakistan and the continuous target killing of Sikh traders, the Sikh community found itself under the constant threat of target killing. This situation created a 'generalized fear' amongst the Sikh community members. This generalized fear is pervasive. A Sikh journalist said:

> *Ap subh uthte hyn. Bacho ko chocolate khilate hyn. Dukan pr jate hyn. Motorcycle per aik banda ata hy or ap ko goli mar jata hy. Community k log dary hote hyn. Sehme hoty hyn. They don't talk openly.* [Urdu]. Trans: you wake up in the morning. Give chocolates to your kids. Go to your shop. And a motorcyclist comes and shoots you dead. Community members are in fear. They are under harassment. They don't talk openly.

Another participant in FGD said:

> "Many female students from Kalasha introduce themselves in university as Muslims out of stigmatization".

A Christian female added:

> "I used to come to office with a cross. Now my husband told me not to as things are not good. This is out of fear."

The findings correspond to the study of Alam, Ali, and Muhammad (2020) where the researchers reported a cloud of fear looming on the faces of the minority groups owing to the pervasive wave of terrorism in the province. The fear in minorities can be explained by 'otherization' theory. If they are considered not part of the major population, they could be exterminated, discriminated, and persecuted anytime. This fear results in a psychological response whereby religious minority groups resort to silence.

4. Silence as a coping strategy (Christians, forgiveness)

In the face of violence and discrimination, the minorities resort to different measures to maintain their mental health. Since violence and discrimination creates grievances, such grievances do not necessarily lead to reactionary violence. Instead, it leads to mental health conditions. Perhaps, it is the perceived helplessness of the religious minority pushes their religious leaders to focus more on non-violent

reactions or remaining silent. A Bishop said:

> "Silence and Humiliation. Silence is our weapon. Humility is our weapon. We did not take revenge. We tolerated it. We forgave. This is the best strategy."

There are very few studies on emotions in the extreme context (Rauch& Ansari, 2024). Extreme context, such as war, natural disaster, or normalization of violence, push individuals to experience and express emotions differently. In another study by the author and colleagues that was conducted on religious leaders and their role in countering violent extremism in Dir valley (Ahmed, Sajid, & Ashraf, 2021), we found that the Imams (local religious leaders) kept silence even in the wake of terrorism and roaming extremist groups. Their silence was a psychological strategy to keep them safe. If they would talk against religious extremist, they would kill them. If they would talk against the state, they would arrest them. So, they were in an awkward situation where silence was a weapon to survive. Similarly, for religious minorities, in the wake of normalization of violence, or routinization of violence (as Ali and Mukherji, 2022 terms it), silence was a defence mechanism in Freudian sense (Rauch & Ansari, 2024).

5. Positive Outlook and Survival Strategies

Given the normalization of violence against religious minorities and discussion on findings mentioned above, we were interested in knowing how the religious minority groups keep a positive outlook in this environment. A Hindu participant said:

> "When I go to my friends during Ramazan, they tell each other in advance that Hindu is coming, do not cook meat (as Hindus do not eat meat religiously). They give me respect. When we have this kind of friends and neighbours, we get positive outlook."

A Christian participant said:

> If you have positive outlook friends and neighbours, your outlook becomes positive.

A Sikh said:

> "Our neighbours are good. We interact at each other's home. We eat together. They are good people."

The data reveals that the neighbours and Muslim friends play a key role in the mental health of religious minorities. The literature on mental health of religious minorities seems to lack an understanding of the role of neighbours and friends in mental health of religious minorities. A search on three scholarly search engines, *Google Scholar*, *Semantic Scholar*, and *Consensus*, with keywords "neighbours, friends, mental health, religious minority" reveal no research paper that directly addresses the role of neighbours and friends in mental health of religious minorities.

Another survival strategy is to focus more on the peaceful teachings of the religious group. A Hindu said:

> We even worship stones and trees. Our religious forbids us from killing even an ant.

Likewise, a Christian (female) participant said:

> "Bible tells us: blessed are the peace makers as they are the children of God".

A Sikh participant said:

> *Baba Guru Nanak said: Koi bole ram ram koi bole Rehman.* He had two disciples: one was Muslim, and the other was Hindu. he took along both. In Amritsar Gurdwara, there are four gates representing four religiouns. In that Gurdwara, Muslims even say their prayers. We also hold Iftaar programs in Ramzan.

Member from Kalasha said:

> *Dehaar is a scholar of Kalasha.* His teaching says that when you kill someone, you become 'Napak' (spiritually dirty). Therefore, our teachings are that if someone has wronged you, you

should forgive. Keep calm.

From the FGD excerpts of different religious groups provided above, one could ascertain that focusing more on peaceful teachings of the religion helps one survive even in the harsh environment.

6. Identification: Proving Loyalty to the State is a constant social struggle

Religious minorities, since are the majority in other countries, are under pressure to identify with the majority on certain events. Their loyalty to the state is often in question. This pushes them to adapt their behaviour so that they are given due recognition in social circles. A Sikh participant said:

> *"14 August ko humary Koch log sabz pagryan band kr hatho mh jhanda lehra rahy hoty hyn. Wo khod ko loyal sabit krne k liye aisa krte hyn.* [Urdu]. Trans: On August 14th every year, some of the Sikhs wear green turban and have flags in their hands. They are trying to prove their loyalty to the state.

August 14th is a national Independence Day celebration. Green is the dominant colour of Pakistani flag representing Muslims while the partial white represents non-Muslims. A Christian said:

> *Hum b 14 August manaty hyn. Hamary sare churches mh 14 August k program hote hyn.* [Urdu]. Trans: we do celebrate 14th August. Our churches do hold such programs.

The minority stress, generalized fear, and emotional psychological silence results in a behavioural pattern where the religious minorities, particularly those who are easily identified, resort to a behaviour that could be termed as 'identification' in Freudian sense. Identification is a psychological defence mechanism in Freudian theory whereby individual tries to make himself/herself like someone else. According to Laughlin (1979), 'this results in the unconscious taking over of various elements of another.' Many religious minorities could be observed to use Muslim terminologies in their conversation. For example, a Hindu participant would frequently say "Allah Qasam" [by Allah, the God of Muslims], instead of 'Raam Raam'. Similarly, Sikh participant would use the terms 'Allah Hafiz' with Muslim friends instead of '*Wahy Guru Ji*'. Christians also use Muslim terminologies. This, according to Laughling (1979) would correspond to unconscious taking over of various elements of another majority in this case.

7. Structural Violence and Mental Health: A Critical Perspective on Religious Minorities in Pakistan

Structural violence, as conceptualized by Galtung (1969), refers to the systemic inequalities embedded within social, economic, and institutional frameworks that hinder individuals from realizing their full potential. This form of violence is not direct but is deeply ingrained in policies, resource distribution, and societal norms, disproportionately affecting marginalized populations. Pool and Geissler (2005) define structural violence as "the constraints on behavior and options imposed by institutionalized inequalities in wealth and power on those who are underprivileged," particularly affecting women, the poor, and minority communities (p. 63).

Religious minorities in Pakistan experience structural discrimination that limits their access to education, economic opportunities, and social mobility. While there are constitutional provisions, such as job and education quotas, intended to uplift minorities, these measures often remain symbolic and fail to integrate them into mainstream society. As a Hindu participant in this study expressed:

> *"Quota is there, but there is no exclusive curriculum or subjects for minority populations in schools, colleges, and universities, especially for the Hindu community. Our children study Islamiyat in educational institutions, while at home they study the Shri Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita. This discrepancy leads to confusion, frustration, and a sense of alienation, which severely impacts our mental health and overall well-being."*

Despite official census figures from 2017 indicating that the Hindu population in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) stands at 6,373 (0.2% of the total population), activists argue that the actual number is much higher, exceeding 50,000 (Bakhtiar, 2023). However, this demographic remains largely invisible in public discourse and policy formulation.

8. Historical Roots of Structural Discrimination

The structural exclusion of religious minorities in Pakistan can be traced back to deviations from the vision of the country's founder, Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Jinnah's address to the Constituent Assembly on August 11, 1947, emphasized religious freedom:

> *"You are free; you are free to go to your temples; you are free to go to your mosques or any other places of worship in this state of Pakistan. You may belong to any religion or caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the state."*

However, subsequent political and constitutional developments eroded this inclusive vision. One of the most significant moments of exclusion was the passage of the Objective Resolution in 1949. A participant from the interviews noted:

> *"The Objective Resolution was the first attack on Jinnah's vision and the existence of religious minorities. When Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan introduced it in the Assembly, all amendments proposed by minority members were rejected. This resolution laid the foundation for religious discrimination, and its repercussions persist today, including the psychological distress it causes within our communities."*

Another major structural setback for non-Muslims in Pakistan was the nationalization of missionary schools and hospitals in the 1970s. These institutions had historically provided high-quality education and healthcare to both Muslim and non-Muslim populations. However, as one respondent lamented:

> *"The second attack on non-Muslim rights was the nationalization of missionary schools and hospitals. These institutions served everyone regardless of religion, but after nationalization, their quality declined. Today, there are no exclusive qualitative institutions for non-Muslims in Pakistan, leading to a sense of discrimination and low self-esteem. The absence of culturally relevant education contributes to identity crises, anxiety, and depression among our youth."*

9. Educational and Economic Marginalization and Its Mental Health Impacts

A major consequence of structural violence is the educational and economic marginalization of religious minorities. Due to the lack of minority-focused educational institutions and curricula, many non-Muslims find themselves restricted to menial, low-paying jobs. As one interviewee stated:

> *"Due to the absence of exclusive education institutions, courses, or subjects for non-Muslims, we have been pushed to the margins. Today, non-Muslims are largely confined to low-paid jobs such as sanitation work. This systemic discrimination is not just an economic issue; it directly impacts our mental health, making us feel worthless and excluded from society."*

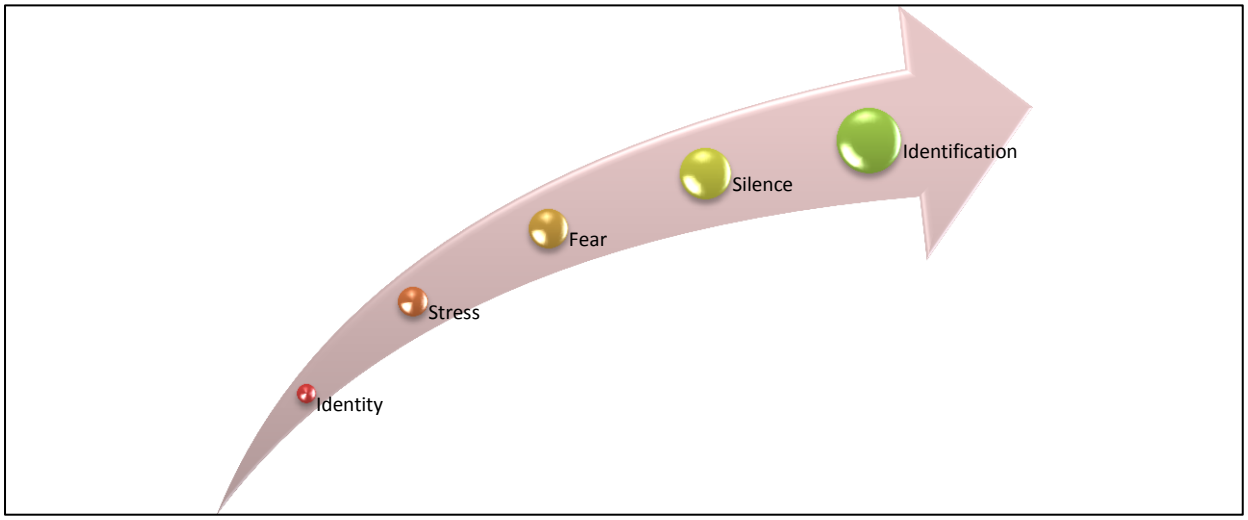
This structural discrimination is further reinforced by mainstream media and societal rhetoric, which often portray religious minorities as outsiders. Such marginalization has profound mental health implications, as exclusion from education and employment opportunities contributes to stress, anxiety, and a sense of hopelessness. Persistent exposure to systemic discrimination has been linked to increased rates of depression and trauma within marginalized communities (Saleem et al., 2016).

The systemic exclusion of religious minorities in Pakistan is a clear manifestation of structural violence. While constitutional provisions exist to protect minority rights, their implementation remains weak, leading to persistent discrimination in education, employment, and social mobility. The psychological

burden of this exclusion results in a heightened prevalence of mental health disorders, including chronic stress, anxiety, and depression. Addressing these issues requires revisiting Pakistan's foundational principles of religious freedom and inclusivity. Without structural reforms that promote equitable resource distribution and mental health support, minority populations will continue to experience systemic discrimination, resulting in long-term psychological and socio-economic repercussions.

Conceptual Model

Figure 1: Religious Minorities and Mental Health Strategies



The findings of this study resulted in a conceptual model presented in Figure 1. Generalized prejudice & discrimination, exposure to violent incidents, exposure to discriminatory practices/events, unfair treatment on certain occasions (e.g. India vs Pakistan cricket match) puts stress on religious minorities. Furthermore, excluded schooling and excluded interaction of Chrisitan minorities in particular puts more stress on the religious minority. The easy identification of Sikh minorities also results in otherization leading to stress. Hindu minorities, particularly the Balmaiki, have poor housing, lower income jobs, lower occupational prestige and lower level of education. Furthermore, the increased discrimination, target killings, bomb-blasts, create fear amongst religious minorities. Both these factors result psychological strategies to maintain their mental health. To do so, they resort to silence and identification to maintain their focus and survive.

Conclusion

This study explored how violence against religious minorities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has become accepted in society through public discussions, government policies, and social beliefs. Drawing on Irum Haleem's framework, the study demonstrated how violence has been moralized through religious and political rhetoric, legalized via discriminatory legislation, and popularized through media and cultural narratives. This process has created a discursive field where systemic violence against non-Muslims is not only justified but also expected, leading to severe psychological distress among minority populations.

The findings emphasis how religious minorities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa face persistent "otherization," make it worse by global geopolitical events and local political dynamics. The study reveals that religious minorities are frequently scapegoated for international conflicts, leading to heightened stress, fear, and a perpetual struggle for belonging. The psychological toll manifests in widespread anxiety, fear of visibility, and social withdrawal. The Sikh community faces a unique vulnerability due to their visible identity, making them easy targets for extremist violence. Meanwhile, other minority groups adopt

survival strategies such as silence, self-censorship, and assimilation into dominant cultural norms to navigate their precarious existence.

Beyond individual coping mechanisms, this study also sheds light on structural violence embedded in education, employment, and legal systems. Despite constitutional guarantees, religious minorities remain marginalized, with limited access to quality education, economic opportunities, and social mobility. The absence of inclusive curricula, coupled with discriminatory policies and exclusionary practices, further entrenches their subordinate status, contributing to long-term psychological distress and a diminished sense of self-worth.

The study concludes that the normalization of violence is not just a momentary act of aggression but an enduring structural reality that shapes the everyday lives of religious minorities in Pakistan. While silence and identification may serve as immediate coping strategies, they do not address the underlying mechanisms that sustain violence. Meaningful change requires challenging the dominant discourse, advocating for policy reforms, and fostering interfaith solidarity. Without dismantling the systemic structures that perpetuate discrimination, religious minorities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa will continue to endure the mental health consequences of exclusion, fear, and insecurity.

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