

Each year, 1,000 Pakistani girls forcibly converted to Islam



This story by Kathy Gannon of Associated Press has been syndicated in several international newspapers especially in India. This is

via [ahoo News](#) had to turn their comment facility off; it is a subject which people feel strongly about.

KARACHI, Pakistan – Neha loved the hymns that filled her church with music. But she lost the chance to sing them last year when, at the age of 14, she was forcibly converted from Christianity to Islam and married to a 45-year-old man with children twice her age.

She tells her story in a voice so low it occasionally fades away. She all but disappears as she wraps a blue scarf tightly around her face and head. Neha's husband is in jail now facing charges of rape for the underage marriage, but she is in hiding, afraid after security guards confiscated a pistol from his brother in court.

"He brought the gun to shoot me," said Neha, whose last name The Associated Press is not using for her safety.

Neha is one of nearly 1,000 girls from religious minorities who are forced to convert to Islam in Pakistan each year, largely to pave the way for marriages that are under the legal

age and non-consensual. Human rights activists say the practice has accelerated during lockdowns against the coronavirus, when girls are out of school and more visible, bride traffickers are more active on the Internet and families are more in debt.

The U.S. State Department this month declared Pakistan “a country of particular concern” for violations of religious freedoms – a designation the Pakistani government rejects. The declaration was based in part on an appraisal by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom that underage girls in the minority Hindu, Christian, and Sikh communities were “kidnapped for forced conversion to Islam... forcibly married and subjected to rape.”

Forced conversions thrive unchecked on a money-making web that involves Islamic clerics who solemnize the marriages, magistrates who legalize the unions and corrupt local police who aid the culprits by refusing to investigate or sabotaging investigations, say child protection activists.

One activist, Jibran Nasir, called the network a “mafia” that preys on non-Muslim girls because they are the most vulnerable and the easiest targets “for older men with pedophilia urges.”
Does this sound familiar?

The goal is to secure virginal brides rather than to seek new converts to Islam.

In the feudal Kashmore region of southern Sindh province, 13-year-old Sonia Kumari was kidnapped, and a day later police told her parents she had converted from Hinduism to Islam. Her mother pleaded for her return in a video widely viewed on the internet: “For the sake of God, the Quran, whatever you believe, please return my daughter, she was forcibly taken from our home.”

But a Hindu activist, who didn’t want to be identified for fear of repercussions from powerful landlords, said she

received a letter that the family was forced to write. The letter claimed the 13-year-old had willingly converted and wed a 36-year-old who was already married with two children.

The parents have given up.

Arzoo Raja was 13 when she disappeared from her home in central Karachi. The Christian girl's parents reported her missing and pleaded with police to find her. Two days later, officers reported back that she had been converted to Islam and was married to their 40-year-old Muslim neighbor.

In Sindh province, the age of consent for marriage is 18 years old. Arzoo's marriage certificate said she was 19.

The cleric who performed Arzoo's marriage, Qasi Ahmed Mufti Jaan Raheemi, was later implicated in at least three other underage marriages. Despite facing an outstanding arrest warrant for solemnizing Arzoo's marriage, he continued his practice in his ramshackle office above a wholesale rice market in downtown Karachi.

When an Associated Press reporter arrived at his office, Raheemi fled down a side stair, according to a fellow cleric, Mullah Kaifat Ullah, one of a half-dozen clerics who also performs marriages in the complex. He said another cleric is already in jail for marrying children.

While Ullah said he only marries girls 18 and above, he argued that "under Islamic law a girl's wedding at the age of 14 or 15 is fine."