Preventing religious conflict amongst the poor and marginalised:
The role of interfaith women peace committees in Pakistani Punjab

Researchers: Yousuf Jalal Gill and Ms. Shamim Gulzar

Moderators: Dr. Miguel Loureiro, Elaine Alam,

Abstract

How do marginalised women enduring intersecting inequalities find agency to solve disputes and minimise local conflicts in Pakistan? We claim these women develop together a series of strategies to solve local disputes, despite the layers of marginalisation they suffer. The first crucial step poor women of lower-ranked sub-castes from Christian and Hindu minorities do is to form alliances with other similar marginalised groups, namely Muslim poor women of lower-ranked sub-castes. Despite coming from different religious backgrounds, geography, class, caste, and gender binds them and allows them to build bridges across their religious differences. Somewhat, there is a reversal of otherisation: instead of focusing on differences (particularly in religious differences) they focus on similarities (being poor, being women, being of lower rank within local social structures) to make them work together. Collectively they work as mediators solving local issues, preventing them from turning into disputes, or preventing disputes from turning into inter-religious violent conflict. In this article we analyse a series of focus group discussions and key informant interviews held in 2020 with women beneficiaries of a series of capacity building programmes across 16 locations in four districts of Pakistan Punjab. Conducted by field staff of the local non-governmental organisation responsible for these programmes, the discussions and interviews centred on how these women experienced discrimination and the role they played in local dispute resolution. We identify three key strategies they use, namely networking, swiftness, and being diplomatic. They constantly work in collaboration with an array of influential local actors, often like-minded, either bringing potential dispute cases to them or bringing them along when meeting the dispute parties, as well as help formal actors' investigations of larger disputes. They try to solve issues as early as possible, fixing misunderstandings to avoid flaring up through religious tension. Finally, they use diplomacy and tactical manoeuvring, persuading parents, family members, or households through gentle resolving, repeated interactions, and empathically showing 'the other.'

1. Introduction

How do marginalised women enduring several intersecting inequalities find agency to solve disputes and minimise local conflicts in Pakistan? More precisely, how do poor Hindu and Christian women belonging to lower-ranked caste groups prevent local disputes turning into inter-religious violent conflict that plague Pakistan? After all, these are women who supposedly lack power and influence as they experience several intersecting levels of marginalisation in a highly hierarchical society, as Pakistan's local stratification systems are based on gender, class, caste, and religion. These are women living in a conservative patriarchal society, poor residents of urban slums or living outside the main villages in settlements called *ghareebabad* (poor people's abode), from lower-ranked *biradaris* (caste-like kinship groups), belonging to religious minorities. Yet, despite the layers of marginalisation they suffer, some of them manage to mobilise change through interfaith peace committees (*Amn komitee*) developing together a series of strategies to solve local disputes. These Peace Committees are the brainchild of Umeed Partnership Pakistan (UPP), a Pakistani local NGO whose work focuses on empowering women and street-children through education, skills training, and rights and legal aid awareness programmes. Peace committees are the third and final stage of their capacity building programmes. At a first stage, UPP enlists about 25 poor and marginalised women living in poor neighbourhoods into a 9-month adult literacy programme. Upon completion, UPP selects around 20 women to complete a 12-month skills training.[1] Some of these women become factory workers, self-employed, or pool in resources and become business partners irrespective of caste, religion, or ethnicity. Throughout this stage UPP field supervisors and trainers select a smaller group of women to form interfaith local groups that can meet and solve local disputes.

In this article we claim that these women develop a series of strategies to solve local disputes, despite the layers of marginalisation they suffer. The first crucial step poor women of lower-ranked *biradaris* from religious minorities - Hindus and Christians - do is to form alliances with other similar marginalised groups, namely Muslim poor women of lower-ranked *biradaris*. Despite coming from different religious backgrounds, class, caste, and gender binds them and allows them to build bridges across their religious differences. Together they work as mediators solving local issues, preventing them from turning into disputes, or preventing disputes from turning into violent conflicts. Through our conversations with these women, we have identified three key strategies they use: swiftness, tactical manoeuvring, and networking. They solve issues as early as possible, fixing misunderstandings to avoid flaring up through religious tension. They

[1] UPP subcontracts local teachers and tailors as trainers for these two levels of capacity building.

use tactical manoeuvring, persuading parents, family members, or households through gentle resolving, repeated interactions, and showing 'the other.' Finally, they network by working with an array of influential actors, often like-minded, putting marginalised individuals and groups in contact, and helping formal actors' investigations of larger disputes.

Our unit of analysis are the Christian, Hindu, and Muslim women and their experiences of marginalisation as documented through 32 focus group discussions and 120 key informant interviews conducted by Umeed Partnership Pakistan (UPP) field staff in four districts of Punjab: Bahawalpur, Khanewal, Kasur and Lahore (four localities in each district). UPP is a Pakistani local NGO whose work focuses on empowering women and street-children through education, skills training, and rights and legal aid awareness programmes. They have been working with the respondents on economic development (small enterprises, adult literacy, and skill development) and then formed local peace committees. The focus group discussions and interviews centred on how women beneficiaries experience discrimination and the role they played in local dispute resolution through local peace committees. Most of the data was collected early 2020 until Covid-19 hit and a lockdown was imposed, after which the remainder was completed. We coded the interviews and discussions using NVIVO Pro.

We divide this article into six parts. Following this introduction, the next section lays out the conceptual markers that delineate the terrain the paper works within and contextualise the intersecting inequalities within the local stratification systems of Pakistan focusing on Punjab, the main site of our research. In section three we describe how UPP creates peace committees and expose the peace committee members' lived experiences of intersecting inequalities. In the fourth section we describe how local dispute resolution happens in Punjab and show how the peace committees get involved in dispute resolution. We analyse committee members' practices and strategies use to engage in local dispute resolution, namely swiftness, tactical manoeuvring, and networking in section five. We conclude with a summary and synthesis of our findings and observations. Bearing in mind Choo and Ferree's (2010) statement that only by the inclusion of marginalised women's perspectives can the political issues emerging from their experiences be addressed by movements, law, or policy-relevant scholarship, we try to include as much as possible women's voices in this article.

2. Intersecting inequalities

The women participating in the peace committees we studied face different types of inequalities on an everyday basis: individually/at the household level, because they live with insufficient

income, assets, and human resources - in other words, they are poor - and socially, because of their lower standing in highly hierarchical social stratification systems based on caste, gender, and religion. As tempting as it might be to think of these types as vertical (poverty) and horizontal (social discrimination), Kabeer (2014: 93) asks us to move beyond the language of vertical and horizontal inequalities. "The intersection, rather than addition, of different forms of inequality, economic, social, spatial and political, the fact that they reinforce and exacerbate each other, is better captured by the language of 'sharp discontinuities' and 'intensifications' which have been found to distinguish the poor from the poorest in many regions of the world. Identity-based disadvantages then, might sound like a good entry point into an analysis of intersecting inequalities where marginalisation operates in groups rather than individuals. Yet, as Tadros (2020) warns us, not only framing an inquiry on intersecting identities rather than inequalities might lead us to an individualistic approach but we might also fall into the trap of confusing the experience of inequality with identity. An intersectional analysis can help reveal how these women experience everyday life and how the intersection of gender, class, caste, and religion shape their experiences. We use Patricia Collin's (2015: 2) definition of intersectionality as the "the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities." We also follow Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall's (2013: 788) suggestion of thinking about intersectionality more as "a nodal point than as a closed system - a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities."

Part of these open-ended investigations into the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of inequalities is the role of contextual violence. In her essay on the salience of the connections between violence, intersecting power relations, and political resistance Collins (2017), takes inspiration from the prominent debates about hate speech that were concerned not just with stereotypes, but also with efforts to prove how negative representations harmed people. We see a similar approach in the work of the women in the peace committees as they try to change people's mindsets around other religions, believing in dialogue as a good starting point for understanding misconceptions around other faiths and beliefs to avoid misrepresentations that harmed people in their locations. Collins (2017: 1466) further states that "violence is not only the *conceptual* glue that joins multiple systems of power, but, as a constellation of dynamic ideas and practices, violence is essential to organising and managing political domination." In several focus groups, peace committee members talked about the fear of mob violence, with some having experienced it first-hand, often perpetrated by the same groups that hold or are backed by

political clout. By coming together in the form of peace committees, these marginalised women aim to lower the anticipated risk of violence - and in doing so they are silently challenging the fear of violence, chipping away the historical local systems of political domination. By its very nature, theirs is a political project and should be studied as such.

While introducing a special issue on intersectionality, Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013: 785) frame the field of intersectional studies as representing three types of engagement, namely the use of an intersectional framework or "investigations of intersectional dynamics", debates on intersectionality as a paradigm, and the employment of an intersectional lens in political interventions. In this article we engage not only with intersectionality as a framework but also as praxis in political interventions. Within the former, we build on intersectionality to reveal the processes by which grassroots organisations - in this case peace committees - shape advocacy strategies into concrete agendas that transcend traditional single-axis identities. We do so in this section exploring the literature on caste, class, and religious identities in Pakistani Punjab, as well as in the following section through examples of how these identities are brought together by UPP to build advocacy around mutual cooperation. Within the latter, we treat peace committees as intersectional projects with underlying tones of political intervention. This 'political intersectionality' (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013) offers a framework for contesting power, linking theory to existent and emergent social and political struggles. The rationale behind the formation of peace committees is the extreme discrimination and fear of conviction that comes through the state's coded laws. Peace committees form a different way of pushing back, as opposed to direct confrontation with the state and enablers of violence. As we show in the following sections, UPP built an approach through an intervention targeted at economic cooperation among women who begin talking to each other about their identities, dismantling the bias fed through local politics and norms. Navigating this difficult area of power imbalances, they start to 'power up' through their participation in these peace committees.

2.1. Contextualising intersecting inequalities in Pakistan

Pakistani society is a highly hierarchical one, with local stratification systems based on caste, class, religion, and gender as the main layers of marginalisation. Each layer makes its citizens second-class: for belonging to a lower-ranked caste, or working class, or religious minority, or not being male. Women's lives in South Asia are lived through the experiences of caste, class, and other social relations of hierarchy which limit their freedoms and decision-making capacity (Shwartz, Adams and Bhattyacharya, 2004). For centuries, caste identities formed social

hierarchies and relations which intersect with and reinforce other types of inequalities (Gorringe, Jodhka and Takhar, 2017). In Pakistan, and particularly in its most populous province of Punjab, the main social unit that regulates life across most families and communities is the caste-like *biradari* (Alavi 2001; Alvi 2007; Loureiro 2015; Mohmand and Gazdar 2007; Shaw 2000; Werbner 1990). *Biradaris* assume a corporate structure that have many integrative functions both politically and economically (Gilmartin 1994; Mohmand and Gazdar 2007; Shaw 2000; Werbner 1990), with notions of blood purity key in defining their boundaries (Alavi 2001). Traditionally, (male) *biradari* leaders use their power to make decisions on marriage, social exclusion, and mediate access to services (Mohmand and Gazdar 2007).

Historically Punjab is home to Christians who have mostly converted from both Hindu upper and lower castes (Patras and Usman 2019; Walbridge, 2003). About 95% of religious minorities live in Punjab and Sindh provinces alone (RFI, 2020). The marginalisation of religious minorities in Punjab has been studied by analysing their identities as an interplay between caste, class, and religion (Amjad Ali 2015; O'Brien 2006; Ruhland 2019; Walbridge 2003). Walbridge (2003) and O'Brien (2006) highlight the strong sense of caste and religious identities as evolving during the period of India and Pakistan's Partition, as well as their complexities through mass conversion after Catholic and Presbyterian missionaries began to evangelise the lower and upper castes in Punjab. Religious discrimination and persecution hold the highest determinant for their marginalisation. In their study of intersectionality and identity markers in Pakistan Azam and Bilal (2022) find that Islam is the main element used in the popular discourse defining Pakistani identity. The feelings of being considered less, inferior and looked down upon on account of not being Muslim highlights the daily lives of many Christian and Hindu women, particular if they are poor. The intersectional discrimination women and girls face particularly due to violence, exploitation of their labour by low wages or denying them altogether, has been well reported (Jag Jeevan and Jacob 2012). For instance, a significant majority of Hindu and Christian women in urban centres engage in occupations such as scavengers or sanitary workers, earning less than Rs. 1,500 per month (Naveed, 2011).

These multiple identities come with experiences of discrimination, of which religion is the most visible identifier. Abject poverty, bonded labour, and religious discrimination exacerbate the position of women and young girls fearing for their lives if they resist the systematic violence for belonging to another faith. In the following table, we list the main episodes of violence embedded in the memory of women beneficiaries that play a key role in their experience of fear. In Lahore, the attacks of 2013, 2015 and 2016 marked a sense of insecurity for these communities because they were targeted for their faith. Events in Kasur, which is more rural,

take on more public humiliation and public messaging of violence against Christians, particularly women. The Shantinagar attack of 1997 still haunts the Christians of Khanewal where today a Muslim mafia of land grabbers is active, engaging Christians in false cases and grabbing their agricultural land. In the Bahawalpur district, 20,000km is covered by the Cholistan desert which is home to a significant Hindu population and fewer Christians spread throughout rural areas. Around 1,000 Hindu girls are forcefully converted to Islam every year (HRCP 2020).

Table 1 – Key violent episodes according to respondents

Bahawalpur district
October 2001: Bahawalpur church attack 17 Christians and a security guard were killed in a mass shooting by 6 attackers of an Islamic extremist group. *Outcome:* The police launched a crackdown two days after the attack and four suspects were reportedly killed. *2016-2020: Forced conversions* Most forced conversions in Punjab happen in Bahawalpur and within these a slight majority of the victims are Hindu women (others are Christian). *Outcome:* Some arrests for the abductions and rape of minor girls. The concept of forced conversion is a contested one among the state, with Muslim clerics' voice more influential as compared to the persecuted and marginalised local minorities. *October 2020: Hindu temple vandalised, Christian and Hindu homes demolished* A Hindu temple was vandalised in the Yazman area of Bahawalpur by a Muslim mob and houses belonging to Hindus and Christians were demolished by local authorities swayed by local politicians. *Outcome:* The Prime Minister condemned the incident through a tweet and promised the reconstruction of the temple. No other action was reported.
Kasur district
June 2013: Christian women beaten and paraded naked Three Christian women were brutally beaten and then paraded naked by armed men of a local landlord connected to the ruling party at the time. *Outcome:* Lahore High Court ordered a report within two weeks of the incident. Whether justice was served or not is unknown. *November 2014: Christian couple brick kiln bonded labourers lynched* A Christian couple bonded labourers working at a brick kiln were thrown into a kiln by a local Muslim mob for allegedly desecrating pages of the Quran (a fact-finding mission learnt the that murdered man had a dispute over wages with the kiln owner). *Outcome:* Police registered a case against 660 villagers and arrested 106 people. In 2016, a court sentenced 5 men to death and 8 others to two years each in prison. In 2018 an Anti-Terrorism Court judge announced the acquittal of 20 people by giving them the benefit of doubt. *March 2020: Christian man tortured to death by landlords* A 22-year-old Christian man was tortured to death by a mob of local Muslim men for polluting the well because he bathed in it. *Outcome:* Four men were arrested after the Punjab Chief Minister and (Christian) Minister for Human Rights took notice following media reports. *May 2020: Christian girl tortured by local religious extremists* A Christian teenage girl was brutally beaten up by local Muslim men, shouting "filthy Christians cannot live here." *Outcome:* Little is known about any action taken against the attackers.

Khanewal district
February 1997: Shantinagar churches and villages attack An angry mob of around 30,000 men burned down 12 churches, 800 Christian homes and around 2,000 Bibles in the presence of more than 300 policemen. *Outcome:* Formal justice never granted by the state (some assailants were arrested but later released). Dispute resolution took place among Christian and Muslim clerics and religious leaders. *May 2020: Christian homes and graveyard vandalised* Christian homes and a century-old Christian graveyard were vandalised by a ruling political party local influential with his followers. *Outcome:* The only action from the state was condemnation on Twitter and a 'promise' for justice. *May 2021: Church attack by armed men* Five armed Muslim men attacked a local church along with the guard and another Christian member. *Outcome:* An FIR was lodged against several identified armed men; however, some were still unidentified. No reported action took place since.
Lahore district
March 2013: Joseph Colony arson attack A Muslim mob rampaged through a Christian locality after a local Christian man was accused by a Muslim friend of blasphemy. Over 100 houses were torched, with the police pressurised by local Muslim clerics and mob not to protect residents. *Outcome:* More than 100 men were declared suspects but not arrested. In 2017 an anti-terrorism court acquitted them all. *March 2015: Youhanabad twin church attack* Two suicide bomb blasts killed at least 14 people and injured more than 70 in a Christian neighbourhood. *Outcome:* In riots that erupted after the bomb blasts, a mob killed two Muslim men whom they accused of being involved. 42 Christians were arrested for their murder and got acquitted five years later. *March 2016: Easter bomb attack (Gulshan Iqbal Park)* An Islamic extremist group bombed a park where many Christian families were out celebrating Easter. At least 76 died and over 300 were injured. *Outcome:* More than 5,000 men in southern Punjab were questioned after a counter-terrorism raid and 200 were detained.

Poverty increases the state of marginalisation for minority communities already underpinned by an otherisation due to their religion (Tadros 2020). This is visible both in urban settings, with Patras and Usman (2019) and Shahid (2007) showing that Christian and Hindu women largely work as urban domestic workers because their work is considered 'low', and rural settings when landlords and other similar decision-makers either isolate or persecute them without them having enough voice to stand against the persecution, as they are too weak to organize collectively. This exploitation manifests in different ways, such as refusing fair wages or wages at all, false allegations of blasphemy manipulating a situation unlikely to be that of blasphemy, or even denying education and jobs with other non-exhaustive ways. People from religious minority communities also engage with more menial jobs at their landlords' farms or brick kilns as compared to Muslims and are often humiliated or exploited. The poverty and religion intersection brings evidence to the understanding that poverty and class are related to power and influence, which was is evident in religious minority women's experiences. Adding a layer of religion, Christians and Hindus are further down in influence and so experience poverty as an expression of exploitation by their employer since there is a dependence on them for livelihoods. The constant experience of exclusion and humiliation makes them disinclined towards building social networks beyond their communities since they fear having false allegations of blasphemy made against them.

3. Women's peace committees

As a social actor, UPP uses the intersectional discrimination women experience to form them into local support groups. In other words, by characterising intersectionality as critical praxis that informs social justice projects (Collins 2015), UPP builds on marginalised women's historical identities such as caste and class, including generational poverty loops, to further progress deeper problems of religious marginalisation by forming peace committees. Peace committees are UPP's last stage of capacity building interventions when working in poor neighbourhoods across Punjab, both rural and urban. UPP's expansion strategy is through word-of-mouth and snowballing: local activists initially approach UPP to come to a particular neighbourhood after hearing of their activities nearby. Upon invitation, and as a first stage, UPP enlists about 25 poor and marginalised women from the neighbourhood into a 9-month adult literacy programme. After completion, UPP selects around 20 women to complete a 12-month skills training (usually

sewing and embroidery). UPP subcontracts local teachers and tailors as trainers for these two levels of capacity building. The training happens in UPP training centres, often rented small halls within the locations. It is during this skills training that UPP field supervisors identify and select a smaller group of women to participate in a shorter, more intensive training aiming to form interfaith local groups that can meet and resolve local disputes. One condition that UPP puts forth at the start of its operations in every location is that all trainings must include women of different faiths, a condition often essential in the workings of peace committees.

Peace committees' composition

During the 12-month skills training, UPP field supervisors – with the help of the teachers and tailors – identify women who are more confident and outspoken and encourage them to participate in the 3-month training on peace committees. With the aim of forming interfaith local groups that can meet and resolve local disputes, UPP trains about 10 women on basic knowledge of rights, family laws, conflict resolution, and interfaith dialogue. Although there are no set selection criteria, UPP pays particular attention to women who show leadership potential, are confident, open-minded, empathic, compassionate, and related to men with some status within their localities. An amalgamation of these qualities is key for UPP, which considers an important factor in building trust (*aetemad*) holding deep value because only then marginalised women can trust 'someone else' with their problems. '*Jabar*' (rigidity) is an immediate outlier and is considered completely undesirable for the peace committees initiative. It is harder to evaluate these qualities in remote communities where women who harness their family influence are also persuaded to participate in the peace communities. For example, if a woman expresses her willingness to resolve another's problem by having the issue referred to her husband, father or brother who are heard more locally such as local councillor or community elder, that potential is considered useful.

When assessing leadership qualities, the UPP team observes how the potential peace committee members engage outside their groups particularly with other faith groups. While being trained they must engage with women outside their community or other faith groups. Such interactions engage them not only for their particular entrepreneurship venture but also with real life problems and issues other women similar to them are facing, even if they are from other faith groups. Of the several characteristics mentioned before, '*humdardi*' (empathy) and '*rawadari*' (compassion) are the key human values the team observes and discusses among the different groups of women interacting in the training programs. The UPP team also observes and records

the positionality of potential members in their community. Influence inside and outside the local community is a plus and useful in the peace committees because they will be heard relatively better than women generally within the households in the community. For example, a Muslim woman who teaches Islamic text at her home had the willingness to stand against and denounce a case of a Christian girl being harassed in the same community. That she was able to rationalise what it means to support justice for someone else was encouraging for the team to convince and include her as a member of the local peace committee. In another example, the wife of a local pastor was selected because she was known to distribute rations to the neighbouring Muslim community along with her husband's parishioners during the first COVID lockdown. It is also important to highlight that such sense of togetherness does not harness itself through an immediate ask of UPP; it develops and comes together over consistent intervention and engaging through ideas that were maybe alien to some of the members before the interventions.

3.1. Peace committee members' lived experiences of intersecting inequalities

It is hard for marginalised women to have agency, due to the power relations shaped by the backdrop of caste, class, gender, and religious stratification in Punjab.

Religion

In Pakistan, the persecution of Christians and Hindus has intensified over the past few decades and the sense of fear exacerbated with incidents of mob violence, lynching and targeted attacks at religious minorities (Jafferlot 2020; O'Brien, 2006; Walbridge, 2003). Religious minorities feel under attack, both through draconian laws manipulated by religious clerics, and the misuse of power by local elites driving the reasons for interfaith conflict. Persecution and discrimination on the basis of religion holds the highest prevalence for the marginalisation of Christian and Hindu women. Both Christian and Hindu peace committee women speak of being looked down upon, considered inferior, targeted, and even persecuted owing to their faith. In rural Bahawalpur Christian and Hindu women said "*we experience a lot of jealousies from the Muslims when we put up any business or get some employment. Most of the Muslims have seen us working as menial job workers thus it become difficult for them to accept us working side by side with them as business owners or to get a reasonable job among them.*" They highlight in particular their visibility as non-Muslim as dangerous: "*Hindu women wear cultural costumes which make them vulnerable sometimes when they are out for human needs or go for shopping they are easily identified for kidnapping. Similarly, Christian women wear normal clothing but without hijab or*

covering properly can be considered easy and soft target for Muslim men."

In rural Kasur, the women notice the harassment and persecution starts at a young age in government schools, where in some primary schools Christian students are not allowed to drink water from the same place where Muslim students drink. More worryingly, religious discrimination is condoned informally and formally. As a Christian committee member sated in one of the focus groups,

> "*My children go to the state school where they are facing a lot of trouble due to their Christian faith. Their classmates are always asking them to go to their own Christian school since they think that they are their enemies. Also, my children study [a] biased curriculum which teaches that Christians and Hindus are bacteria and enemies of Islam. They are forced to study Islam instead of their own religion since there are no arrangements for a Christian teacher to teach these children.*"

Even Muslim committee members are aware of the persecution and point out the pervasiveness of hate literature. "*Being a Muslim woman, I observe that hate literature is the main cause of religious tension and discrimination. Hate literature can be found in many different forms, like in newspapers, pamphlets, stickers, banners, and posters. It is also being distributed through electronic media.*" The same woman explained how herself was indoctrinated from a young age:

> "*Being a [Muslim] majority woman, I have been listening since my childhood that minority communities are living in Pakistan but we Muslims are superior to them. Even my parents did not tell me that they are equal citizens of Pakistan and have equal rights to live life with freedom. Due to my mindset, I always thought that my minority friends are not equal to me.*"

In urban Lahore a particular visible moment of religious discrimination happened during the first covid-19-related lockdown, where Christians were refused access to food ration distributed by Islamic organisations in their neighbourhoods - unless they we're willing to convert. Expressing her fear thinking about the difficulties during the COVID lockdown period, a Christian committee member said "*when various unknown religious (Islamic) organisations began to supply ration support, we felt that we could not reveal our minority religious identities through our names out of fear of being asked to convert to Islam. Otherwise, we will end up like Aasiya Bibi and others accused of blasphemy."*

Caste

As expected, apart from Hindu committee members in rural Bahawalpur, very few other women mentioned caste as a layer of marginalisation. For instance, as a Hindu committee member from

Bahawalpur said, "*for Muslims there is no issue of caste while dealing with Hindus since for them all Hindus are unclean and untouchables. In Pakistan, Hindus cannot challenge a Muslim to ask why they are treating them as untouchables since Muslims maintain superiority over them and they believe that their religion is also superior to that of the Hindus.*"

Yet, if we focus on the caste-like features of how these women live their in social stratification systems, characterised by strong endogamy, lower hierarchical status, exclusion based on local notions of purity and pollution, and hereditary occupation, we cannot but see casteism. For instance, when asked about caste-based discrimination, a Christian committee member in Lahore responded: *"They (Muslims) call us Chuhra because we are Christian."* Chuhras are a Dalit caste associated with being sweepers as their traditional occupation, a polluted occupation. The overwhelming majority of Protestant Christians in Pakistan are descendants of Chuhras who converted to Christianity during the British Raj. According to Singha (2015) Chuhra Christians create counter-narratives focused on veiling caste identity and creating a new genealogical history for their community that is not connected to Dalit ancestry as a form of protest against caste discrimination. In the previous section we mentioned the work of Patras and Usman (2019) and Shahid (2007) in the perception of menial work ascribed to Christians and Hindus such as that of domestic workers, mostly ascribed to urban Christian women in Punjab. As one of the committee women mentioned, "*The [religious] minority women are working as domestic workers and majority people consider that they are born for this purpose.*"

In rural Kasur one Muslim committee member referred to the case of another village where "*a Muslim lady joined ALP Centre and found that there are mix group of women from different faiths. The lady said to her teacher that she could not continue her training because she can't sit with minority women since they are considered untouchables.*" Meanwhile in urban Lahore some Muslim committee members decided to boycott those who boycotted Christian women: "*Christian women were not allowed to touch any vegetables and fruits. Muslim women who wear hijab don't face this hate which Christian women face by the shopkeepers and even street vendors. Muslim committee members talked about it and resolved that [they] would not be buying anything from them.*" Still, purity and pollution play a strong role even within poor and marginalised women. In rural Kasur one committee member told the story of her mother:

> "*My father was working as labourer; it was difficult for my father to bear daily expenses with his low income. So, my mother also started work as housemaid to help out my father. But she was only given cleaning work at the landlord's house. She was not allowed to cook for them or to touch their utensils due to her Christian faith. For other works than the cleaning Muslim maids were hired by the landlord's family. My mother was not allowed to mix up*

with the Muslim maids."

Class

Poverty also exacerbates women's marginalisation because they are already excluded, discounted and rejected making it harder for them to improve their social status. Mohmand and Gazdar (2007) point to perpetuating poverty and class disparity within social structures, and here religious persecution plays a role in the lives of religious minorities which can be regardless of caste, intensifying feelings of inferiority. In both urban and rural areas there is a physical separation between poor and not poor. Particularly in rural areas such as Bahawalpur, poor and marginalised groups live outside the main villages in settlements called *ghareebabad*. As a Hindu committee member from Bahawalpur explained, *"the rich landlords who are Muslims have proper villages, but poor people - Hindus, Muslims and Christians - live in bastis called ghareebabad and these bastis are away from the main villages."* They are offered menial jobs in landlords' farms or brick kilns. A Christian committee member said her father kept repeating that "*our total existence is dependent on our landlord.*" In the focus group discussions in Bahawalpur women mentioned that the illiteracy rate especially among women is very high thus women have no employment except to work on the farms of landlords and brick kilns. For their sustenance women have to work alongside their men. The Muslim women were also of the same opinion - since they are poor and of a lower ranked *biradari*, they face the same social problems and are always under endless debt.

In Khanewal, a Christian woman reiterated her plight by mentioning *"we poor Christian labourers are nobody in this society. We have no status and no recognition, and nobody protects us. Even the landlord's buffalos, which provide them with milk, are treated better than us - and they are provided with good fodder. Our existence is dependent on our landlord."* Another woman in the same focus group clarified that

> "*Sometimes it's not the matter of minority or majority; it's just the matter of financial instability and I'm sad to say that minority people are financially weak and are not able to pay a bribe and hence they decide to stay quiet. Whenever any incident with minority people takes place, the police instead of coming direct to minority people they run towards the landlords and other influenced people from whom they get bribes.*"

In Kasur women ion the focus groups brought out two interesting reflections: one, that according to them the weaker sections of society are exploited by the rich ones based on religion, and when such exploitation becomes intolerable people may come up with quarrels against each

other. The other, the cyclical nature of poverty: a lack of education forced the men and women of their villages to work at the brick kilns, factories, and on the landlords' farms. They work on low wages not enough even for the daily sustenance thus they are unable to send their children to school. Some of the women in Lahore also expressed that poverty was what forced them to take up jobs they would otherwise not opt for: "*the people of my community are illiterate, poor, engaged in menial jobs thus easily exploited, manipulated and dominated by the powerful forces of the area.*" Covid and related lockdowns furthered their poverty at several instances: first, many women who worked as daily wage cleaners were fired without compensation because the lady house owners where they used to work asked them to leave; men lost their jobs because the factories where they worked shut down. The closure of educational institutes during the pandemic meant most girls were not continuing their studies due to unavailability of study gadgets, Wi-Fi, and financial constraints. These girls were getting married earlier as parents could not wait for the unpredictable episodes of lockdown: some poor parents even sold their daughters' dowry, vehicles, small businesses, and land share during lockdown to deal with economic instability.

Gender

That rules are very different for women and are grounded very strongly in patriarchy is stated by Shaheed (2009) and Yasmeen (2009) projected regardless of class, caste, or creed. The marginalisation of religious minority women is manifested through power and influence and their coercion as soft targets of violence. Perpetuating the sense of fear among religious minority women significantly tightens their movement in public spaces. A report by the Minority Rights Group (2011) speaks about 'outside attempts' which seek to control religious minority women through forced marriages and faith conversions and abductions among other forms of violence. Both urban and rural Christian and Hindu women commented on harassment in public spaces, the threat of being abducted, raped, and forcefully converted to Islam. A Christian woman in Lahore said: "*The reported cases of non-Muslim girls being forced to marry Muslim men and convert to Islam due to their marriage has noticeably increased during the past three years in Yohanabad.*" Another aspect of patriarchal marginalisation are the barriers women face in Pakistan's labour market. As Hindu committee member in Bahawalpur said, *"women are paid half of what men are paid for working as farm labourers and women are exploited more than the men. We have to do what they [landlords] say and our husbands cannot stand against that because we are Hindu".*

The intersection among the highlighted layers of marginalisation is of significant importance which build and connect the strong externalities which perpetuate religious minority

women's experiences. Christian and Hindu families are therefore not able to stand against the Muslim more powerful majority who violate their rights. In some areas to blend in with the majority or to avert any imminent threat, religious minority women may choose to wear a headscarf when in public spaces or avoid being commented at as 'too outgoing'. An association with land in the Punjab province, ownership or labour, in the Punjab province is considered a mark of class, so the rural 'Chuhra', if even labourers, were better off than the urban who would only be designated as 'sweepers' (Walbridge, 2003). Walbridge and O'Brien both acknowledge the entrenched discrimination and problematic relationship with the majority Muslim community. This builds on the work of Gazdar and Mallah (2012) when speaking to dynamics in rural Punjab on poverty highlighting that poverty has been reinforced for religious minorities through the intersection of religion and to some extent caste. This also means that regardless of caste, factors of religious persecution are also a link to the perpetuating poverty, class disparity within social structures in rural Punjab (Mohmand and Gazdar, 2007).

4. Local dispute resolution in Pakistani Punjab

Across South Asia there is a trend to solve issues locally, particularly disputes (Acemoglu *et al.* 2020; Loureiro et al 2021). Disputes are a particularly common occurrence in Pakistani Punjab, as manifested by high litigation rates. Despite being one of the main services citizens demands in Pakistan (and a core responsibility of the state), the sheer cost and untimeliness associated with formal dispute resolution mechanisms make non-state actors an attractive option (Acemoglu *et al.* 2020). For instance, most poor households and women find it hard to access formal justice institutions because the process is time consuming, lawyer fees are high, and courts are far away. Particularly in rural areas, there are clearly defined non-state actors historically providing parallel dispute-resolution services, often ignoring formal law and compete with state institutions. These non-state forums are typically *panchayats*, local councils of village elders and other influentials, usually given the authority to resolve disputes on behalf of residents of the community (Acemoglu *et al.* 2020). While the state judicial system is relatively punitive, *panchayat* decisions tend to be restorative, using "a combination of mediation, compromise, and penalties, including social ostracism, boycott, and sometimes even physical retaliation" (Acemoglu *et al.* 2020: 3098).

Gazdar et al (2013) recognise that while local dispute resolution through *panchayats* disadvantages the socially excluded economic poor, they also lose authority to local Muslim clerics over greater 'religious sanction'. The authors also attribute a 'state-like position' to tribal

chiefs through which they exercise control, authority and if needed, violence. While they almost certainly have a clientelistic relationship with formal dispute resolution and influence local political processes, socially unequal and excluded groups like women and religious minorities perpetuate a dependence on such mechanisms of local dispute resolution. Land ownership and control is looked at as a benchmark for more dominant social groups especially in Pakistani Punjab, where engaging with the state for formal dispute resolution is more accessible to the same group, also called 'political agents' (Cheema et al, 2009). In Punjab, the Punjab Panchayat Act, 1929 followed by provincial local government laws provide some legitimisation to local *panchayats* and *musalehat* councils led by local elders, which are not officially functional when there is no local government system in place (Hassan and Malik, 2020). The working of such dispute resolution mechanisms is therefore unofficial and informally run by local elders or street level bureaucrats. Owing to the social structures of power in Pakistani Punjab, 'community justice' through *panchayats*, *musalehat* councils and religious clerics takes place on a broad spectrum ranging from criminal justice for murders, land disputes, and domestic violence (Braithwaite and Gohar, 2014). Loureiro et al (2021) write about accountability bargains and identify the role of intermediaries such as individuals often members of these informal institutions as the problem solvers and connectors for the downtrodden to governance systems with the ability to address disputes urgently. Acemoglu et al (2020) in their study speak directly to the conditions in which citizens engage in formal and informal local dispute resolution and the factors which direct them to access either, such as trust.

People prefer to engage with local community groups or *panchayats* for dispute resolution is a well-established fact, a main reason being that it is cost effective and quick, even if it may not be fair or just. However, the dispute resolution landscape for religious minorities is far more complicated and delicate. Christian and Hindu families also fear abductions, rape and forced conversions of minor girls, which if taken to the courts is disproven with fake birth registration documents and a condemnation of the idea of resisting a conversion to Islam. Other disputes with no recourse are resisting hate material in school's curricula, discrimination at workplaces, extra-judicial killings, all which local communities cannot redress. The role of intermediaries, therefore, is pertinent to this paper when discussing local dispute resolution and marginalised communities. However, the fact that these marginalised people are religious minorities makes the local dispute resolution in communities more measured and to some extent a matter of survival to remain alive despite the dispute.

4.1. Peace committees' involvement in dispute resolution

In Punjab, the targeting of marginalised women through discrimination fuels local disputes and conflicts (Hakim and Aziz, 1999). Despite this, minority groups remain disenfranchised and largely reliant on support from their social group. Coburn and Dempsey (2010) and Kandiyoti (2007) offer analyses on rights-based violations experienced by marginalised women and their involvement leading to empowerment and more agency. However, our primary interviews and first-hand experiences of women tell us that the volatile context of religious conflict does not make women's participation easy. The factor of trust in the state and its apparatus such as the police and justice system are also important since that is factually absent among religious minorities. Development practitioners working with religious minorities highlight that attacks on Christian minorities such as the ones in Gojra, Shantinagar and Sangla Hill all ended in local dispute resolution with no formal conviction ever taking place. This reinforces the accounts of the marginalised women in the peace committees who say they cannot trust the public system nor gain access to justice.

The disputes that women through the peace committees get involved in tend to be more related to domestic problems particularly those than can avoid an escalation that could lead to consequences as severe as blasphemy allegations. Throughout the four districts, the issue of danger and fear with regards to being a religious minority and the very likelihood of suffering like all the trigger events of the past is a primary concern. For instance, a Christian committee member in Lahore[2] explained: "*My son was being threatened with the blasphemy law after being accused of luring a Muslim girl while he was only standing outside that house. This case would have flared up, but the women peace committee members resolved it through their intervention.*" The disputes that women get involved with are therefore the ones that are less complicated. For example, a Christian committee member in Lahore mentioned that "*there was a fight between a Muslim and a Christian child in our neighbourhood [Yuhanabad], and the Muslim family was being aggressive edging towards accusing us [the Christian family] of blasphemy. We had to intervene to try and deescalate the issue by offering repeated apologies and assuring our alliances that something like this will not happen again*". Here, they can get involved directly, however, with other issues of more serious nature their role is more indirect through collective action and developing a localised support system. This point is key to understand how marginalised women find or make their space in locally engaging for dispute resolution.

In their work on collective action for local dispute resolution, Narayanan et al. (2020) describe how patriarchy has profoundly constrained women's participation and any possibilities

[2] In Kasur, a focus group discussion relayed a similar story.

of leadership and similarly many respondents reiterated the same. Prillaman (2017), though, speaks to the political participation of women, and explains that women face hindrances because they have fewer social networks or opportunities to come together. Walbridge (2003) also draws evidence from Christian NGOs that were also encouraged to build grassroots social networks through economic development programs. In addition, O'Brien (2006) speaks to the detailed construction of the social, political, and religious history of religious minorities in Pakistan through an ethnographic study of communities the author was working with as a priest. Walbridge and O'Brien both acknowledge the entrenched discrimination and problematic relationship with the majority Muslim community. A Hindu development practitioner said, "*trigger events or incidents such as church bombings and mob attacks on communities, and an external push to resolve disputes locally before they escalate, either by NGOs, religious leaders, or local alternative dispute resolution mechanisms or actors, are all push factors for marginalised women to involve themselves in local dispute resolution.*" Rains (2020) speaks to women's civic participation increasing when they can make group-based claims; however, whether this works for local dispute resolution in marginalised religious minority women and their intersectional discrimination is unknown. Though there is limited scholarship on how minority religious groups can make choices that they value (Sen, 2000) when they have such restricted capability and freedom, especially choices relating to their ability to deal with disputes and conflicts; the case study of Umeed Partnership Pakistan brings to light the complex relationship between intersectional marginalisation of religious minority women and their involvement in local dispute resolution.

5. Strategies marginalised women use to engage in local dispute resolution

Focusing on religious minority women alone though, does not do justice to how these peace committees operate. The first crucial step Christian and Hindu poor women of lower-ranked *biradaris* do is to form alliances with other similar marginalised groups, namely Muslim poor women of lower-ranked *biradaris*. Together they work as mediators solving local issues, preventing them from turning into disputes, or preventing disputes from turning into violent conflicts. Through our conversations with these women, we have identified three key strategies they use. First, they solve issues as early as possible, fixing misunderstandings to avoid flaring up through religious tension. They are diplomatic, persuading parents, family members, or households through gentle resolving, repeated interactions, and showing 'the other.' Finally, they network by working with an array of influential actors, often like-minded, putting marginalised

individuals and groups in contact, and helping formal actors' investigations of larger disputes.

Swiftness

Another important and common strategy peace committees employ is one of solving disputes as early as possible. Particularly with incidents that happen across religious communities, the aim is to avoid issues flaring up through religious tension. As a committee member from Khanewal said, "*as soon as we come to know about any incident whether it is of domestic or religious nature, without wasting time we take action and resolve the issue.*" Their rationale is that most cases which are not sensitive from the start can be resolved at local level, but cases of sensitive nature cannot. Once the issue takes the shape of religious tension it becomes 'sensitive' and it is very difficult to resolve locally, as emotions flare up and threats start being hurdled.

In Kasur one of the peace committees visited a family of a Christian boy who used to stand outside his house when Muslim girls passed by coming from school, which made the girls' parents uncomfortable. Before the issue could flare up, the committee met with the boy's family and explained the seriousness of the problem. The family took immediate action and stopped their boy not to stand outside of their house unnecessarily. Often cases start from children's play. For instance, in Khanewal a fight between Muslim and Christian children in school quickly became a fight between their respective families and could soon snowball into something bigger. A Christian and Muslim child were sharing a toy car and playing outside on the road during which the Muslim child got injured. When the local peace committee came to know about the incident they first went to the house of the Muslim family and reminded them that children fight every day while playing but after some time they become friends again. The committee members then contacted a local political leader and requested him to call both parties together to make peace. Similarly in Lahore, while a group of Christian children were playing cricket, two men took their ball and shouted at them insinuating their had thrown the ball intentionally at them to make their clothes dirty as they were going for evening prayers at the local mosque. The Muslim peace committee members quickly went to talk to the wives of these men, while also involving their own husbands to talk to the men and sort out the misunderstanding.

At times the dispute is a bigger one involving religion from the start. In one location in Kasur, the local pastor started using a loudspeaker for prayer sessions to the irritation of many Muslims whereas it is customary and accepted for Muslims to use loudspeakers for calls to prayer and Friday sermons. As the issue was about to inflate, the local peace committee persuaded local religious and political leaders to call a meeting with the people from both sides.

The situation becomes that of the Muslim majority with impunity and acceptance for their freedom of expression and religion, as opposed to any freedoms for the religious minority other further grounding an 'otherization'. During the meeting both parties agreed and then managed to convince the pastor not to use the loudspeaker for prayer sessions, therefore avoiding a larger conflict. In another location also in Kasur a pastor was intending to build a church in his land situated in the centre of the village where mostly Muslims lived and were unhappy about this. After several meetings encouraged by the local peace committee, the different factions in the village agreed on the church being built in the centre of the Christian colony and the Muslim community even offered to help financially to build the church.

Tactical manoeuvring

With the aim of peaceful coexistence, tactical manoeuvring is always at the core of peace committees' activities. A key element of this diplomacy is persuasion, as it can be seen in the case of education. Peace committee members persuade parents not to pull children from school when they suffer discrimination and persuade teachers and school administrators not to discriminate and be aware of discrimination. A case in point happened soon after the first Covid-related lockdown in rural Bahawalpur. During the lockdown, the only school accessible to Hindu, Christian and Muslim students in a remote village was closed, with reports that it would not re-open as the landlord decided to use it for his own purposes. The peace committee members first arranged for a place to restart the school and then, along with the school administration, made door-to-door visits and persuaded parents to allow their children to come back school. Another element connected to persuasion is that of persistence. Committee members continually engage with different parties in the dispute, at times in a constant manner, until they manage to persuade the parties to agree or comply with a decision that is beneficial to all. This can happen when the dispute parties are within families, such as the case of convincing families to accept their daughters back after a failed marriage in urban Lahore to repeatedly going around schools in rural Kasur meeting administrators to solve issues of minority schoolchildren. Peace committee members' repeated interactions within their locations improve interfaith peaceful coexistence at another level as well through exposure. As a Lahore Muslim member commented, Muslim parents do not like their daughters working with non-Muslims on small enterprise projects such as embroidery and sewing in the form of cooperatives. However, the visibility of women peace committee members' actions in the area and the increased level of peaceful co-existence among project beneficiaries of different faiths has made some parents reconsider their views.

Persuasion and persistence also require sensitivity and tactfulness. In several schools across rural Kasur, Christian students and parents constantly complain of harassment and ill treatment and feeling powerless as school administrators not being able to solve this issue. Muslim and Christian committee members visited together the different school administrations both to alert them to the existence of religious discrimination in their schools, as well as to ask them to teach students about equality of rights to avoid that such incidents get out of control and permanently damage peoples' lives. In one instance, the school administration understood that the school's water cooler should be accessible to both Christian and Muslim children equally and there should be no discrimination among them, nor should any instigation be allowed by Muslim children or their parents. All class teachers were also asked to be aware of similar examples of potential discrimination during classes. Peace committees also must be extremely tactful when trying to convince families from different religious backgrounds involved in more serious disputes. In a case in Kasur, committee members met with a Muslim family and asked them to make peace with their Christian neighbours to prevent the situation moving into formal courts, which would be detrimental to both parties. The dispute was over a Muslim family accusing a Christian boy of 'eyeing their daughter' every time she would step outside the house. In this case, the committee members urged the Christian boy and his family to stop standing outside their own house 'unnecessarily'. In one of the locations in Lahore, Muslim families were complaining about Christian sermons on Sundays. The churches are established inside the privacy of local pastors' homes in large rooms. Most pastors only use a sound system inside to be more audible, but with thin walls which has the tendency to be audible outside the walls of that space too. These days in particular Christians become visible in the community gathering. In relatively larger numbers though this is still in closed spaces inside communities. At larger churches in different parts of the city, they become even more visible on particular days of service. A Muslim committee member used empathy to convince the Muslim families living nearby to stop complaining about the sermons. She asked them, "*if Christian people can listen our prayer calls five times a day, Friday prayers, and respect our month of Ramzan, then why can't we [Muslim] tolerate them and their sermons?*"

Finally, another element of tactical manoeuvring is one of showing the other side what they have in common and what unites them. At times committee members support each other and attend religious events like Eid-ul-Fitr, Christmas, and Holi. Being together during the different kinds of trainings makes these women familiar with themselves. In a focus group discussion in Lahore one committee mentioned that "*[us] being so long together in the centres shed out our differences and misconceptions about each other's caste and creed and now we promote that in our families*

too." Across all locations, several committee members organised social gatherings for themselves, their families, and their communities during the past few years which plays a role increasing the level of acceptance among their communities, as well as trusted mediators across sub-groups. A Muslim committee member in Bahawalpur highlighted this when she said, "*it is my experience that when we women of different faith communities and as member of women peace committees go to families to resolve their cases, they accept us whole heartedly since they know us personally that we are working together even being from different faith communities.*" A Hindu committee member also in Bahawalpur member stated, "*the role of women peace committees is important in our community. Due to their efforts the atmosphere of peaceful co-existence has increased. We begin to understand each other. Prior to these initiatives we never dared to call Muslim and Christian women to come together to solve social or religious issues. But now whenever any incident takes place in our area, we give a call to all our Muslim and Christian colleagues, and they immediately come together and intervene into the problem and find solution to it.*"

Networking

There are a multitude of actors women peace committee members engage with to solve disputes. From local actors such as religious leaders, politicians, community leaders from all religious groups, and social workers, to external actors that operate in their locations such as NGOs and even bureaucrats. Committee members develop and enhance linkages with influential stakeholders and try to work together on common issues. In villages dominated by powerful landlords who own mills and brick kilns where marginalised groups work under sub-human conditions, committee members persuade local politicians, religious leaders, and *panchayat* members to pressurise these landlords to improve working conditions. Peace committees also assist individuals from marginalised groups economically, helping them to access markets, credit, and debt reductions. For instance, in Lahore a Christian man was trying to buy a used car in instalments from a Muslim man who was refusing to do so until her found a Muslim guarantor. A Muslim committee member talked to the auto owner and found a Muslim guarantor who helped the Christian man paying in instalments[3]. In Khanewal, peace committee members brought in a local political leader to persuade Muslim creditors to give more time to a Christian man to pay his debts. In another case also in Khanewal committee members brought along a local councillor with them when they met with the president of the local market association to report a harassment case.

[3] At the same time, other committee members provided some stress management skills to the Christian man and his mother.

A common expression across focus groups when discussing networking was 'going along with'. Women committee members are well aware of the limitations of being a woman while solving disputes in a strongly patriarchal society. As a plan of action, when they have to meet with the parties involved in a particular dispute - particularly the more powerful ones - they go along with local influential actors. When probed deeper, there's another element to this strategy: quite often these influential actors that 'go along' are liked-minded ones. In other words, they behave similar to Childs and Krook's (2009) critical actors at a localised level. Three examples stand out: one in Lahore, where peace committee members along with local leaders of good repute pressurised parents to stop the practice of child marriage and did succeed in lessening the early marriage ratio. The other two happened Muslim religious leaders in two different locations of Khanewal. In one case, the local peace committee went with a Muslim religious leader - who had helped them in the past and, according to a respondent "*is a nice person who understands the equal rights for women and minorities*" - to a Christian family who objected their women being employed. After a long discussion, they all managed to convince the family by saying that the law gives women the right to work, as do all religions including Islam. In another case, the Muslim members of a peace committee engaged with a Muslim religious leader and together started a sensitisation campaign about polio vaccination[4].

Part of the networking process happens at the individual level. Quite often it is women - mothers and wives - who contact individual peace committee members on behalf of men. While solving disputes through networking, women peace committee members become in the process intermediaries between poorer and marginalised groups and individuals and public authorities as seen elsewhere in Punjab (Loureiro et al 2021). This is particularly noticeable when peace committee members try to help individual women suffering from domestic abuse or struggling with divorce matters. Committee members assist women getting in contact with organisations such as the Shirkat Gah Women's Resource centre, the Bali Women's Crisis Centre, or the AGHS Legal Aid Cell, who provide free legal representation for vulnerable women and religious minorities among others. Finally, in the event of disputes moving upwards into the sphere of the state, committee members engage with formal actors, such as police officers, lawyers, journalists, doctors, and local political leaders. They help by assisting in official investigations on the causes of the dispute, from internal disputes within families (mostly divorce cases) to larger neighbourhood cases. These examples came out particularly during focus groups discussions in Kasur and Lahore. One interesting highlight was their attempt to give equal importance to

[4] Polio vaccinations are a contested subject among several conservative Muslim clerics and their followers who preach that the vaccination is a Western conspiracy to induce infertility among the Muslim population (Ali et al 2019).

members of both minority and majority communities and insist to gather information on the root causes of a particular dispute before taking any action.

Conclusion

In this article we try to unpack the strategies poor and marginalised women use to prevent local disputes turning into inter-religious violent conflict in Pakistani Punjab. How do they do it? They work together, act quickly, use tactical manoeuvring, and work in collaboration with key actors. Collectively under Peace Committees, they try to solve issues as early as possible, fixing misunderstandings to prevent escalation. They use tactical manoeuvring, persuading parents, family members, or households through repeated interactions, gentle resolving misunderstandings, and empathically showing 'the other' - they show neighbourhoods an alternative to conflict. And they constantly work in collaboration with an array of like-minded influential local actors, from informal public authorities such as *panchayat* members, political brokers, religious leaders, landlords, to formal ones, such as NGOs, and local public officials. Under the hat of peace committees, these women bring potential dispute cases to the attention of informal public authorities, bring these actors along when they meet the dispute parties, and even help formal actors' investigations of larger disputes. Their secret ingredient: they create a fellowship with equally marginalised Muslim women. In fact, the first crucial step poor women of lower-ranked sub-castes from Christian and Hindu minorities do is to form alliances with other similar marginalised groups, namely Muslim poor women of lower-ranked castes living in slums and *ghareebabads*. Despite coming from different religious backgrounds, geography, class, caste, and gender binds them and allows them to build bridges across their religious differences. Instead of focusing on differences (particularly in religious differences) they focus on similarities (being poor, being women, being of lower rank within local social structures) to work together as peace committee members. Collectively they work as mediators solving local issues, preventing them from turning into disputes, or preventing disputes from turning into inter-religious violent conflict.

Still, this is not entirely a rosy picture: many women in these peace committees face a lot of resistance from local elites, even within their minority groups who see them encroaching in what they perceive to be their 'natural' territory, that of local dispute resolution. Also, if a dispute escalates beyond a misunderstanding these women are powerless (and therefore the need for swiftness in their actions). At the end of the day though, women peace committees do exhibit

some small successes in preventing inter-faith conflict, where expectation is low. As Kabeer (2014: 88) states, “the effects of exclusion can work in silent and invisible ways which nevertheless have a profound impact on those who are excluded.” Equally, the effects of inclusion promoted by peace committees through ‘sameness’ rather than ‘difference’ can have a silent yet profound impact in bringing people together. Our data tells us that if women who experience intersecting inequalities come together, there is a chance they can avert the risk of violence and conflict. These women’s actions fall part of what Stephen Jay Gould (2001) calls the Great Asymmetry: “one of those thousands of little things that go unnoticed - but play huge role in preventing big ugly things from happening.”

Bibliography

Acemoglu, Daron, Ali Cheema, Asim I. Khwaja, and James A. Robinson (2020) Trust in State and Nonstate Actors: Evidence from Dispute Resolution in Pakistan’. *Journal of Political Economy* 128(8):3090–3147.

Ahmed, Zahid Shahab, and Farooq Yousaf (2018) Pashtun Jirgas, Their Potential in Pak-Afghan Reconciliation and National Reconstruction, *South Asia Research* 38(1): 57–74.

Alavi, Hamza (2001) The Two Biradaris: Kinship in Rural West Punjab, in: T. Madan (ed.) *Muslim Communities of South Asia: Culture, Society and Power*, 25–76. New Delhi: Manohar.

Ali, N., Ahmad, N., Khan, H. Ali, S., Akbar, F., and Hussain, Z. (2019) Polio Vaccination Controversy in Pakistan, *Lancet* 394: 915-916.

Alvi, Anjum 2007. India and the Muslim Punjab: A Unified Approach to South Asian Kinship, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (3): 657–678.

Amjad-Ali, C., 2015. From Dislocation to Dislocation: The Experience of the Christian Community in Pakistan, *International Review of Modern Sociology* 41(1): 1-28.

Azam, S., and Bilal, M. (2022) The Crisis of National Identity: Politics and Intersectionality of Identity Markers in Pakistan, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, *0*(0).

Bharadwaj, S.; Howard, J. and Narayanan, P. (2020) Using Participatory Action Research Methodologies for Engaging and Researching with Religious Minorities in Contexts of Intersecting Inequalities, *CREID Working Paper 5*, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

Bustamante-Gavino, M.I., Rattani, S. and Khan, K. (2011) Women’s Empowerment in Pakistan–

Definitions and Enabling and Disenabling Factors: A Secondary Data Analysis, *Journal of Transcultural Nursing* 22(2): 174–181.

Coburn, N. and Dempsey, J. (2010) Informal Dispute Resolution in Afghanistan. United States Institute of Peace (*Special Report 247*), August. Washington DC: USIP.

Cheema, Ali, Shandana K Mohmand, and Manasa Patnam. (2009) Colonial Proprietary Elites and Institutions: The Persistence of De Facto Political Dominance, *SSRN Electronic Journal*. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1473910.

Childs, Sarah and Mona Lena Krook (2009) Analysing Women's Substantive Representation: From Critical Mass to Critical Actors, *Government & Opposition* 44:125–45.

Cho, S., Crenshaw, K., McCall, L. (2013) Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs* 38:785–810.

Choo, Hae Yeon, and Myra Marx Ferree (2010) Practicing Intersectionality in Sociological Research: A Critical Analysis of Inclusions, Interactions, and Institutions in the Study of Inequalities. *Sociological Theory* 28(2):129–49.

Collins PH. (2015) Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 41:1–20.

Collins PH. (2017) On Violence, Intersectionality and Transversal Politics. *Ethn. Racial Stud.* 40(9):1460–73.

Fuchs, M.-M. and Fuchs, S.W. (2020) 'Religious Minorities in Pakistan: Identities, Citizenship and Social Belonging', South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, 43(1), pp. 52–67. doi:10.1080/00856401.2020.1695075.

Gazdar, H. and Mallah, H.B. (2012) Class, Caste and Housing in Rural Pakistani Punjab: The untold story of the five marla scheme. *Contributions to Indian sociology*, *46*(3): 311-336.

Gilmartin, David (1994) Biradari and Bureaucracy: The politics of Muslim kinship solidarity in 20th Century Punjab, *International Journal of Punjab Studies* 1(1): 1–29.

Gorringe, H., Jodhka, S.S. and Takhar, O.K. (2017) Caste: experiences in South Asia and beyond *Contemporary South Asia* 25(3): 230–237.

Gregory, S. (2012) Under the Shadow of Islam: The plight of the Christian minority in Pakistan, *Contemporary South Asia* 20(2): 195-212.

Gould, Stephen Jay (2001) *A Time of Gifts*, New York Times, 26 September 2001.

Hassan, Abida, and Malik, Dil Muhammad (2020) Evolution of Dispute Resolution Processes:

From Informal to Formal and Back to Informal, *Global Social Sciences Review* V(II): 327–33.

Hakim, A. and Aziz, A. (1998) Socio-cultural, religious, and political aspects of the status of women in Pakistan, *The Pakistan Development Review* 37(4): 727-746.

Hussain, A., Saleem, A., and Naveed, A. (2011) *Connecting the Dots: Education and Religious Discrimination in Pakistan*. Islamabad, Pakistan: United State Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Jaffrelot, C. (2020) Minorities Under Attack in Pakistan, in: V. Kaul and A. Vajpeyi (eds) *Minorities and Populism: Critical Perspectives from South Asia and Europe*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 173–182.

Kabeer, Naila (2014) Social Justice and the Millennium Development Goals: the challenge of intersecting inequalities, *The Equal Rights Review* 13: 91–116.

Khan Mohmand, S.; Ananthpur, K.; Lodha, S.; Cheema, A. and Acosta. A.M. (2010) The Variable Burden of History: Non-State Dispute Resolution in Three Regions of South Asia, unpublished.

Loureiro, Miguel (2015) The Boundary Within: Equality, Hierarchy, and Exclusion in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, *Contemporary South Asia* 23(3): 314–33.

Loureiro, Miguel, Pracha, Maheen, Ahmed, Affaf, Khan, Danyal and Ali, Mudabbir (2021) Accountability Bargains in Pakistan. *IDS Working Paper 550*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

Khan Mohmand, S. and Gazdar, Harris (2007) Social Structures in Rural Pakistan. Islamabad: Asian Development Bank.

Moosa, Z., Rahmani, M. and Webster, L. (2013) From the Private to the Public Sphere: new research on women's participation in peace-building, *Gender & Development* 21(3): 453-472.

O'Brien, J. (2006) *The Construction of Pakistani Christian Identity*. Research Society of Pakistan.

Ruhland, H. (2019) *Peacebuilding in Pakistan: A Study on the Religious Minorities and Initiatives for Interfaith Harmony*, Waxmann Verlag.

Patras, A. and Usman, A. (2019) Intersection of Gender, Work and Caste: The Case of Christian Female Sweepers of Lahore, *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 56(2): 363–373.

Prillaman, S.A., Pande, R., Singh, V. and Moore, C.T. (2017) *What Constrains Young Indian Women's Labor Force Participation? Evidence from a survey of vocational trainees*. Technical Report.

Cambridge, MA: J-PAL and Evidence for Policy Design, Harvard University.

Rains (2020) Women and (Informal) Work- Gender, Informal Labor, and the Civic Participation Gap in Urban Slums.pdf'.

Sadaqat, M.B. and Sheikh, Q.A. (2011) Employment situation of women in Pakistan, *International Journal of Social Economics* 38(2): 98-113.

Shah, Timothy S. (2020) *Pakistan Religious Freedom Landscape Report*. Religious Freedom Institute.

Shaheed, F. (2009) Structural barriers, cultural constraints, meso traps & other challenges: Women's empowerment in institutional mechanisms and power & decision-making, The Beijing Platform for Action 15 Years on, in: *UNESCAP Expert Group Meeting, Bangkok*, 13-15.

Shaw, A. (2000) *Kinship and Continuity: Pakistani Families in Britain*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic.

Singha, Sara (2015) *Dalit Christians and Caste Consciousness in Pakistan*. PhD dissertation, Georgetown University.

Shahid, Ayesha (2007) *Silent Voices, Untold Stories: women domestic workers in Pakistan and their struggle for empowerment.* PhD thesis, University of Warwick.

Tadros, M. (2020) Invisible Targets of Hatred: Socioeconomically Excluded Women from Religious Minority Backgrounds, *CREID Working Paper 2*, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

Tarikul Islam, Mohammad (2020) Access to justice for marginalised rural victims across South Asia: issues and challenges, *South Asia @ LSE* (08 Jun 2020), blog entry.

Walbridge, Linda (2003) *The Christians of Pakistan: The Passion of Bishop John Joseph*. Routledge.

Werbner, P. (1989) The Ranking of Brotherhoods: The Dialectics of Muslim Caste among Overseas Pakistanis, *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 23(2): 285–315.

Yasmeen, S. (1999) Islamisation and democratisation in Pakistan: Implications for women and religious minorities, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 22(sup001): 183–195.