

Debate Pack

CDP-057 (2022)

By Philip Loft,
Tim Robinson

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Gender-specific religious persecution

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1 General debate on gender-specific religious persecution

On Thursday 17 March 2022, there will be a Backbench Business Committee debate in Westminster Hall on the topic, “Gender-specific religious persecution.” It will be led by Jim Shannon MP and Dr Lisa Cameron MP.

1.1 Interaction of gender and religious persecution

Many religious minorities have long been subject to [discrimination and campaigns of persecution](#). Vulnerability to persecution and discrimination based on belief and religion [can also be influenced by factors including a person’s economic status, gender, age, and ethnicity](#).

The coronavirus pandemic has also exacerbated existing inequalities and made the challenge of addressing the needs of some communities harder.

In 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief published a [report on gender-based violence and discrimination in the name of religion or belief](#). The report argued that:

- In all regions of the world, governments had failed to protect people from gender-based violence and discrimination by individuals and groups claiming a religious justification for such actions
- Instances of gender-based discrimination in the name of religion or belief included female genital mutilation, marital rape, forced marriage, polygamy, and to deny reproductive and sexual rights
- Consultations with representatives from the south and south-east Asia regions had found women and girls from religious minorities to be at particular risk of violence, including forced marriage and conversion. The report acknowledged that governments themselves had often sought to combat gender-based violence and discrimination.

The rapporteur cited steps taken to combat these, such as school instruction on gender-based violence, engagement with religious and belief leaders, and grassroots campaigns to promote greater tolerance and understanding.

1.2 Situation reports

The degree of religious persecution based on gender is unknown. In 2019, the Bishop of Truro’s [independent report on Foreign & Commonwealth Office](#)

[support for persecuted Christians overseas](#) (PDF) concluded that in relation to countries where Christians are a minority:

In global terms, Christian women are more likely to be a victims of discrimination and persecution (including people trafficking, gender-based violence, kidnapping and forced marriage) than men [...] Anecdotal evidence has begun to emerge from persecuted Christians that women were suffering violent attacks, targeted abuses and restrictions in the face of 'double marginalisation'.

Several reports have been published on the intersectionality between gender and freedom of religion or belief.

APPG report on the situation in Pakistan, 2021

In November 2021, the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for International Freedom of Religion or Belief published a report suggesting that, based on available evidence, up to 1,000 religious minority women and girls in Pakistan [are forcibly married and converted each year](#).

They are predominantly from Hindu and Christian communities. The APPG states the lower social and economic status of these women and girls makes them particularly vulnerable.

[In response to the report](#), the Foreign Office Minister, Lord Ahmad, expressed the UK Government's disappointment that draft legislation criminalising forced conversions stalled in Pakistan's Parliament in 2021. The UK Government says it has regularly raised the issue of freedom of religion and belief with Pakistan.

APPG report on freedom of religion and belief, 2021

In February 2021, the APPG published a report on the [state of freedom of religion and belief worldwide](#) (PDF).

Citing examples from India, Nepal, Malaysia, Iraq, Colombia, and Pakistan, the APPG expressed concern that women from minority religion and belief communities had become much more vulnerable, due to the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

In the case of Iraq, following the rise of Islamic State (IS)/Daesh in 2014, Yazidi women and girls [were sold as slaves, and subject to sexual violence](#). The Yazidis are a religious minority, primarily residing in northern Iraq. In 2021, 2,800 women and children were estimated to still be in IS captivity.

In Nigeria, Islamist terrorist group Boko Haram [abducted at least 270 girls](#) from one school in 2014. Many were targeted because they were Christians or because they were attending school. Several were reportedly threatened with death if they refused to convert to Islam. Many remain missing, and

[abductions from schools have continued](#), despite a [strengthening of the Nigerian police force](#).

Aid to the Church in Need report, 2021

The Aid to the Church in Need, an organisation seeking to support Christians being persecuted, published a report on the [kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimisation of Christian women and girls](#) (PDF) in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Asia in 2021.

In February 2022, the UK Government said it would [study the report's contents](#) and said its human rights work took account of the interaction between gender and religion or belief.

1.3

Government policy

In November 2020, the Government launched the Declaration of Humanity, which [condemns conflict-related sexual violence](#) and committed its signatories to work to dismantle harmful interpretations of faith and belief that may be used to condone or commit acts of sexual violence.

To January 2021, 50 faith and belief leaders, civil society organisations and governments [had signed from across the world](#).

UK aid has funded several programmes promoting human rights, including:

- Through the UK Aid Connect, [the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development](#) (Creid) programme, which [works with women from religious minorities in Egypt, Pakistan, India, Iraq and Nigeria](#).
- Sexuality and Religion Network (Serene) in East Africa, which works with religious groups to [promote LGBTIQ inclusion](#).
- [Resisting gender-based violence and injustice through activism with biblical texts and images](#) in four African countries, which seeks to assist those most vulnerable to gender-based violence through education.

Forthcoming conference

In July 2022, the UK will [host the International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#). In March 2022, the Government said discussions on possible themes and outcomes [are still ongoing](#).

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Press and media articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

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[Say Her Name: Women Persecuted for Their Religion or Belief](#)

Newsweek

Anurima Bhargava and Tony Perkins

8 March 2022

[Taliban vows to protect 'religious' rights of women on International Women's Day](#)

Independent

Shweta Sharma

8 March 2022

[The Christian women left behind after another war: Syria](#)

Christian Today

Open Doors UK and Ireland

8 March 2022

[Persecuted women and girls 'feel abandoned by the West'](#)

Christian Today

Anita Laryea

9 March 2022

[ACN report gives voice to the persecution of Christian women](#)

The Catholic Register

Wendy-Ann Clarke

4 March 2022

[Hindu nationalists target India's Christian women and girls](#)

Mission Network News

Katey Hearth

28 February 2022

[Sarah in North Africa was thrown out because of her faith. Twice.](#)

Open Doors

23 February 2022

Religious persecution is ramping up worldwide—we must secure safe routes for refugees

Politics.co.uk

Tim Farron

17 February 2022

Christian women are 'agents of resistance' against North Korea's Communist regime

Christian Today

Julian Mann

19 December 2021

Twelve Incidents of Persecution Documented Against Pakistani Christian Women and Girls in Two Months

Persecution.org

25 September 2021

The hidden persecution of Christian women

Church Times

Elaine Storkey

6 March 2020

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PQs

Business of the House

10 Mar 2022 | 710 c502

Asked by: Jim Shannon

As everyone knows, this week we had International Women's Day. In my work as chair of the all-party group for international freedom of religion or belief, I repeatedly hear of the double trauma that women and girls face if their religious or belief group suffers persecution—it is rampant across the world. In response to a recent article by Open Doors printed in Christian Today, I wonder whether the Leader of the House will provide time for a statement on what more could be done to better address the needs of vulnerable Christian women left behind in Syria, who could not flee the war and continue to live without full realisation of their human dignity.

Answering member: Mark Spencer | Leader of the House

The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight this issue, and I pay tribute to his work; he is a long-standing campaigner on these issues of religious freedom and those who are persecuted around the world. I would give him advice on how to be heard in this Chamber, but he is the master of getting across his message in this Chamber, and I wish him well in continuing to deliver.

Maira Shahbaz

21 Feb 2022 | 121778

Asked by: Brendan O'Hara

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps her Department is taking to support the case of Christian Pakistani girl Maira Shahbaz and her family, who have been in hiding for 18 months.

Answering member: James Cleverly | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

It is longstanding Government policy not to comment on individual cases, where to do so may put individuals or their family members in danger.

The UK condemns the forced marriage and forced conversion of women and girls in Pakistan. We regularly raise Freedom of Religion or Belief, women and girls' rights and gender equality at a senior level with the Government of Pakistan, including on individual cases. During his visit to Pakistan in June 2021, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for South Asia met Prime Minister Khan, as well as other senior government ministers including Foreign Minister Qureshi, and Human Rights Minister Mazari. During these

meetings, Lord Ahmad highlighted the need to address persecution, promote respect for all religions and increase tolerance for religious minorities. He also met interfaith leaders to understand the situation of minorities in Pakistan, particularly the issue of forced conversion and marriage of young girls. Most recently, Lord Ahmad discussed the need to promote respect for all religions with Governor of Punjab Chaudhry Mohammad Sarwar on 28 November, and on January 6 with Shaikh Hasan Haseeb Ur Rehman of the Council of Islamic Ideology, and Pir Naqeeb, custodian of the Eidgah Sharif Shrine in Rawalpindi. In addition to diplomatic engagement, the FCDO funds programmes in Pakistan that directly address early and forced marriages, gender-based violence and modern slavery.

Christianity: Females

02 Feb 2022 | 111575

Asked by: Jim Shannon

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, if her Department will make an assessment of the implications for its policies of Aid to the Church in Need's report, entitled Hear Her Cries, published on 28 November 2021.

Answering member: Vicky Ford | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

We have taken note of Aid to the Church in Need's report entitled "Hear Her Cries" published in 2021 and will study its contents.

The UK Government ensures our human rights policy work considers intersectionality of human rights, for example, the importance of gender-based violence, forced marriage and conversion, which is often experienced by women and girls from religious or belief minority communities. In 2020, the Minister of State responsible for human rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, launched the Declaration of Humanity by Leaders of Faith and Leaders of Belief. The Declaration calls upon leaders from many faiths and beliefs to dismantle harmful misinterpretations of religious texts used to justify acts of sexual violence and to tackle the stigma facing survivors of this violence. Over 50 leaders, have already signed it.

Pakistan: Females

15 Nov 2021 | HL3581

Asked by: The Lord Bishop of Leeds

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of (1) forced conversion, and (2) forced marriage, of girls from minority communities in Pakistan.

Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK strongly condemns the forced marriage and forced conversion of women and girls in Pakistan. We regularly raise our concerns about Freedom of Religion or Belief, women and girls' rights and gender equality at a senior level with the Government of Pakistan. During his visit to Pakistan on 23 and 24 June, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for South Asia and the Minister responsible for human rights, met Prime Minister Khan, as well as other senior government ministers including Foreign Minister Qureshi, and Human Rights Minister Mazari. During these meetings, Lord Ahmad highlighted the need to address persecution, promote respect for all religions and increase tolerance for religious minorities. He met interfaith leaders to understand the situation of minorities in Pakistan, particularly the issue of forced conversion and marriage of young girls. In addition to our diplomatic engagement, the FCDO funds programmes in Pakistan that directly address early and forced marriages, gender-based violence and modern slavery.

Christianity

23 Nov 2021 | 74940

Asked by: Rosie Cooper

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps her Department is taking to prevent sexual violence towards Christian women and girls around the world.

Answering member: Amanda Milling | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The Foreign Secretary has put ending violence against women and girls, including the use of sexual violence in war, at the heart of UK foreign and development policy. The UK is building a new consensus with our partners to condemn sexual violence in conflict as a "red line". We are committed to exploring all options for further international action, including the possibility of a new international convention. Through our investments of up to £67.5 million in the **What Works to Prevent Violence: Impact at Scale** programme, we are also scaling up proven violence prevention approaches globally, including sexual violence, for the most at-risk groups of women and girls. In 2020, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon launched the Declaration of Humanity, which unites multiple faiths and beliefs in a common front to challenge damaging societal norms and calls for support for survivors of sexual violence internationally. Bilaterally, Ministers and officials regularly raise specific cases of concern, and discuss practices and laws that discriminate on the basis of religion or belief. Multilaterally, we also work with the UN, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Council of Europe, G7 and other multilateral fora to promote Freedom of Religion or Belief. In 2022, the UK will host an international Ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief to energise collective efforts on this agenda as

well as a major global summit to unite world leaders around action to prevent sexual violence in conflict.

[Afghanistan: Females](#)

03 Nov 2021 | 63656

Asked by: Sir George Howarth

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what steps she is taking to help women from religious minorities who are persecuted in Afghanistan by the Taliban and have their freedoms severely curtailed due to fear of kidnapping, forced conversion and forced marriage.

Answering member: James Cleverly | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

We are committed to prioritising women and girls in the Government's response to the situation in Afghanistan and remain concerned about their safety. We are consulting Afghan women's organisations to understand how best to support their needs, in safety and with dignity. On 21 October, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State for South Asia, UN and the Commonwealth, attended the annual Women, Peace and Security Open Debate at the UN Security Council and met prominent Afghan women to discuss how the UK can best support women and girls.

[Religious Freedom: Females](#)

23 Apr 2021 | 181252

Asked by: Chris Evans

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent assessment his Department has made of trends in the level of gender-specific religious persecution of women from religious minorities abroad.

Answering member: Nigel Adams | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

The UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all. We recognise that women and girls from religious minorities can often suffer because of both their gender and their faith. That is why we ensure our human rights policy work considers the intersectionality of human rights, including the importance of addressing the specific vulnerabilities experienced by women and girls from religious minority communities.

The UK is recognised as a global leader in tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG) in all its forms, by pioneering approaches around the world that have shown that VAWG is preventable. In the DRC, a project with faith leaders and community action groups halved women's experience of intimate partner violence from 69% to 29%. Preventing and responding to conflict-

related sexual violence remains a top priority for the FCDO. In November, the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, launched the Declaration of Humanity by faith and belief leaders which calls for the prevention of sexual violence in conflict and denounces the stigma faced by survivors, including by children born of rape. Through UK Aid Connect, FCDO has supported the Creid programme (managed by the Institute of Development Studies) to work with women from religious minorities in five countries in Africa and Asia to understand the problems they face and identify effective approaches to tackle these issues.

Religious Freedom: Females

20 Apr 2021 | 179184

Asked by: Dr Lisa Cameron

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, whether supporting women and girls from marginalised religious and belief communities is a priority for his Department.

Answering member: Wendy Morton | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office

We recognise that women and girls from religious minorities can often suffer because of both their gender and their faith. That is why we ensure our human rights policy work considers the intersectionality of human rights, for example the importance of addressing the specific vulnerabilities experienced by women and girls from religious minority communities. We have no programmes that specifically target women and girls from marginalised religious or belief communities but there are programmes that benefit these women and girls.

The Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) has publicly committed to retaining and building on the Strategic Vision for Gender Equality

(https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/708116/Strategic-vision-gender-equality1.pdf)

which sets out our commitment to leave no girl or woman behind, particularly those facing multiple exclusions including on the basis of their ethnicity, religion or belief.

4 Other Parliamentary material

4.1 Debates

[Christians and Religious Minorities: India](#)

24 Feb 2022 | 709 cc223-246WH

Motion that this House has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians and religious minorities in India. Sitting adjourned without Question put.

[Freedom of Religion or Belief: 40th Anniversary of UN Declaration](#)

25 Nov 2021 | 704 cc518-547

Motion that this House has considered freedom of religion or belief and the 40th anniversary of the UN Declaration on the elimination of religious intolerance. Agreed to on question.

[Violence against Christians: Central African Countries](#)

23 Sep 2021 | 701 c216WH

Motion that this House has considered the matter of violence against Christians in central African countries. Agreed to on question.

[Covid-19: Religious and Ethnic Minority Communities](#)

22 Jun 2021 | 697 cc261-281WH

Motion that this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on religious and ethnic minority communities throughout the world. Agreed to on question.

[Covid-19: Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)

26 Nov 2020 | 684 cc503-490WH

Motion that this House has considered the effect of the covid-19 pandemic on freedom of religion or belief. Motion lapsed.

[Persecution of Christians and Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)

21 Oct 2020 | 682 cc381-145WH

Motion that this House has considered progress on the Bishop of Truro's independent review on persecution of Christians and freedom of religion or belief. Motion lapsed. Sitting suspended.

[Freedom of Religion or Belief](#)

12 Mar 2020 | 673 cc177-200WH

Unallotted backbench debate on a motion that this House has considered freedom of religion of belief. Motion lapsed.

4.2

Early Day Motions

Persecution of religious minority women and girls**EDM 1052 (session 2021-22)****Dr Lisa Cameron****8 March 2022**

That this House celebrates International Women’s Day on Tuesday, 8 March, 2022; supports the UK’s commitment to promoting gender equality around the world; recognises that women from religious minorities face persecution and discrimination on account of both their faith and their gender; highlights particularly the cases of Christian women in Nigeria, Yazidi women in Iraq, and Hindu and Christian girls (forcibly converted and married) in Pakistan; calls on the Government to facilitate asylum for the Christian girl Maira Shahbaz, currently in hiding in Pakistan; urges the Government to intensify its efforts to ensure the safe release of Leah Sharibu, Alice Ngaddah and the Chibok girls in Nigeria; insists that gender-specific religious persecution is clearly recognised in FCDO policy and practice; recommends that the Government fund targeted programming for women facing double vulnerabilities as members of minority faith communities; and encourages the FCDO to work with local faith actors who can best respond to these experiences.

International Women's Day and freedom of religion or belief (No. 2)**EDM 1575 (session 2019-21)****Dr Lisa Cameron****3 March 2021**

That this House celebrates International Women’s Day on 8 March 2021; recognises that women from marginalised religious or belief communities encounter unique persecution and challenges due to their gender; expresses deep concern that these women have become much more vulnerable since the outbreak of covid-19 resulting in increased cases of domestic violence, kidnapping and forced marriage, as seen in the case of 14 year old Maira Shahbaz and 13 year old Arzoo Raja in Pakistan; notes the launch of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Freedom of Religion or Belief’s new report entitled, Commentary on the Current State of Freedom of Religion or Belief (2020) which draws attention to the intersection between gender inequality and freedom of religion or belief violations with many specific examples; and urges the UK Government and the international community to act to mitigate the impact that the covid-19 pandemic has had on freedom of religion or belief globally and, in particular, on women and girls who are doubly discriminated against because of their gender and their beliefs.

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Further reading

[Hear Her Cries: The kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimisation of Christian women and girls](#) (PDF), Aid to the Church in Need, 2021

[Abductions, forced conversions, and forced marriages of religious minority women and girls in Pakistan](#) (PDF), All-Party Parliamentary Group for Pakistani Minorities, September 2021

[Commentary on the Current State of International Freedom of Religion or Belief \(2020\)](#) (PDF), All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, February 2021

[It is time we recognise how ideologically motivated sexual grooming targets women from religious minorities](#) (PDF), Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development, Briefing Note, August 2020

[Policy Focus: Women and Religious Freedom](#) (PDF), United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, May 2018

[Women and Religious Freedom: Synergies and Opportunities](#) (PDF), United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, July 2017

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