



CREID

Coalition for Religious Equality
and Inclusive Development

Briefing Note

**It is time we recognise how
ideologically motivated sexual
grooming targets women from
religious minorities**

Mariz Tadros

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About CREID

The Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) provides research evidence and delivers practical programmes which aim to redress poverty, hardship and exclusion resulting from discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. CREID is an international consortium led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and funded by UK aid from the UK Government. Key partners include Al-Khoei Foundation, Minority Rights Group (MRG) and Refcemi.

Find out more: <https://www.ids.ac.uk/creid/>

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It is time we recognise how ideologically motivated sexual grooming targets women from religious minorities

Mariz Tadros

Sexual grooming is a highly complex and understudied phenomenon. It connotes a very particular type of power relationship which is ‘often used as a means to prepare an individual or to place an individual into a position in which they are unwittingly subjected to abusive and/or exploitative behaviour’¹. While poor young girls and women globally are disproportionately vulnerable to all forms of sexual violence, we are particularly concerned about the oversight of **ideologically motivated sexual grooming targeting poor girls and women from religious minorities.**

In collaboration with its partners, the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID) has gathered evidence as part of its research initiative on the intersection of gender, religious marginality and socio-economic exclusion as it affects women and their communities in Egypt, Myanmar, Pakistan, Iraq and Nigeria.

The evidence gathered suggests that across contexts and religions, there is a pattern of girls and women being targeted for sexual grooming, not only out of sexual predation, but as part of a wider political project to hurt the religious minority and create a religiously homogenous society.

The evidence suggests that the targeting of girls and women who belong to religious minorities is to be distinguished from the sexual grooming that women and girls fall globally victim to in its *intent*; *social norms* allow for its perpetration and laws fail to prevent its occurrence.

1. Ideologically motivated intent of targeting

The targeting by the predator who is from the dominant religion of the young woman, not only on account of her social and economic vulnerability, but specifically because of her affiliation to a religious minority

Sexual grooming involves predators who target girls and women who are vulnerable often because of economic deprivation, personal hardship, harsh family circumstances and societal rejection, etc. The predator who targets girls and women from religious minorities often targets individuals who suffer from these intersecting vulnerabilities, but who also happen to be specifically members of religious minorities.

¹ Sinnamon, G. (2017) Chapter 16 - The Psychology of Adult Sexual Grooming: Sinnamon’s Seven-Stage Model of Adult Sexual Grooming, in Petherick, W. and Sinnamon, G. (eds) *The Psychology of Criminal and Antisocial Behaviour: Victim and Offender Perspectives*, Academic Press: Cambridge, 459-487.

The intent here is not only sexual predation (as is common among all forms of sexual grooming) but also the ‘conquest’ of a woman from a religious minority and ‘claiming’ her for the majority religion.

As with sexual grooming of adults, the predator employs ‘emotional and psychological manipulation tactics’ rather than necessarily overt forms of violence. This may give the impression of a consensual relationship, especially if the victim is promised marriage and she is assured that she can maintain her religious identity. However, in effect, the intention is to marry her with the purpose of forcibly converting her to the religion of the majority. Individual men who engage in the sexual predation of women who belong to religious minorities often believe that they are doing their religion a favour or are ‘winning over’ a convert to their religious community.

Examples include:

- In 2017 the Hindu Jagran Manch (HJM) announced that it will facilitate the marriage of around 2,100 Muslim women who wish to marry Hindu men and will also support them financially and provide security, according to *The Indian Express*. The HJM have openly declared that their intention is to promote the conversion of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism
- Development practitioners from Nigeria who are part of the CREID programme shared corroborating evidence that Muslim men have been approached by particular groups and offered financial rewards in return for taking on Christian women as wives. One participant shared that one of her female research subject’s husband was given money to ‘win over’ Christian women as wives so they could have children and grow the Muslim population while diminishing the Christian one. In some cases there is a particular targeting of underage girls who are forced to marry and then convert
- In Egypt, our informants have also been able to trace back the disappearance of women to Salafi movements who have been giving financial rewards to Muslim men who are able to marry and convert Coptic women.

The marriage and forced conversion of a female subject who is a member of a religious minority is not only the subjugation of the girl or woman herself but the humiliation of the entire community. In some cases, the conversion of a woman is celebrated by parading her in front of her original religious community in order to impress upon them that they have lost one of their own.

The Pakistani Human Rights Commission noted the ideological intent behind targeting Hindu girls, and how it is different from Hindu boys: ‘When girls converted it was celebrated, but when Hindu boys converted they were forced into destitution’ (2019:5). In the case of Reena and Raveena, two Hindu Pakistani girls who disappeared and whose families insist were not married under conditions of free choice, Mr Shaman Das Meghwar, their brother, disclosed that cases of conversion were frequently being celebrated through jubilant processions in Daharki to further harass and depress the Hindu community (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2019:4).

On a strategic level, the conversion of more women to the dominant religion would mean less procreation by members of the religious minority and therefore a strategy of shrinking their demographic.

In other words, **the ideologically motivated nature of sexual grooming is intended, psychologically and demographically, to fulfil a broader political project - creating a religiously homogenised society.**

The laws of many of these countries, as suggested below, encourage conversion into the dominant religion and automatically assign the dominant religion to the offspring of a relationship with a woman who belongs to the religious minority.

2. Socio-political support for the sexual predator

The role of the legal system and society in preventing women who belong to religious minorities from escaping or being rescued from their groomers

It is not just intent, but also the legal and social responses to the disappearance and conversion of girls and women that gives sexual grooming its distinct character. It is interesting that the literature on missing minority women rarely uses the word ‘grooming’ when talking about the disappearances. Grooming assumes a purposeful process, and in many communities where women who belong to religious minorities disappear, there is a reluctance to interrogate whether they did so of their own free accord.

Activists from Pakistan and Egypt point out that often the police will not act. In the absence of a clear sign of the use of force (i.e. kidnapping) when women disappear, the police’s reaction is that the woman may have chosen to elope of her own free accord, and therefore it is not within the remit of the police to search for her.

In Pakistan, participants in the CREID programme stated that, emboldened by the reluctance of the police to ensure that the disappeared are not being held against their will, there have been instances where members of the community have threatened to capture more women if the family of the woman who has disappeared insists on finding out where their daughter is. In this sense, there is fear of collective punishment of the religious minority from the broader community if they pursue tracking their daughter.

We have documented cases where families have been threatened with the abduction of their other daughters if they continue to press for the return of their kidnapped daughter. Kidnappers are rarely arrested and justice rarely served where the subjects are from poor, socially and religiously marginalised families. This is corroborated by the Pakistani Human Rights Commission’s report which noted that:

‘Cases involving the Meghwar and Kohli communities tended to be reported as they were relatively better off financially, but virtually all the forced conversion cases of the Bhagri and Bheel communities went unreported’.²

Women’s vulnerability is accentuated on the basis not only of gender, religious minority status and class, but also caste:

*Dalit women of Pakistan fall victim to sexual abuse, abduction and forced religious conversion. Dalit women tell of kidnappings and abductions leading to forced conversion and marriage into Muslim families. The stories of the women’s families reveal that religious conversion is a barrier to the return of women to their families and action by police personnel.*³

In many countries laws do not allow persons to convert out of the dominant religion (e.g. Pakistan, Egypt and in some states in India) and therefore women who have been forced into converting, whether through psychological coercion or through force, are legally not permitted to convert back to their original religion.

Moreover, the laws in many countries do not give women who belong to religious minorities the right to pass on their religion if their spouse comes from the dominant religion. Consequently, the offspring from relationships with men who have forcibly married them will automatically fall under the dominant religion of the father.

The outcomes of politically orchestrated sexual grooming are more violations of rights and the entrenchment of a vicious circle of powerlessness.

These are some of the effects that we have documented:

- **Impact on the subject herself:** The psychological abuse that victims of ideologically motivated sexual grooming endure often ‘breaks’ them into accepting their predicament. They often suffer dual stigma: in their marriages, they will be often be treated with contempt for not having been born into the dominant religion and if they ever have a chance to escape and go back to their families, they may be shunned or stigmatised forever
- **Impact on freedom of mobility for women who belong to the religious minority:** In response to the real or rumoured disappearance of women, many parents respond by denying women the freedom to leave the house, to attend school or to participate in leisure and/or public activities in the community. The restrictions imposed by families who fear for their girls represents a denial of the right to education, the right to freedom of association and the right to freedom of expression.

The CREID programme believes there is an urgent need to:

² Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2019) Forced Conversions in Ghotki? Field investigation report, *HRCP* [Online], June 2019, Available: <http://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Ghotki-investigation-report-20190807-EN.pdf>

³ International Dalit Solidarity Network (n.d.) Dalit women in Pakistan, *IDSN* [Online], Available: <https://idsn.org/key-issues/dalit-women/dalit-women-in-pakistan/>

- (1) Recognise officially ideologically motivated sexual grooming as a form of sexual predatory behaviour that targets many women who belong to religious minorities**
- (2) Create an accountable police force that secures the return of girls who have disappeared without delay**
- (3) Ensure that families and the girl who has disappeared are afforded a safe and neutral place to meet, while ensuring full protection from any harassment or mortal fear**
- (4) Ensure that young women who have disappeared have a safe refuge if they do not want to return to their families, or where the whole family needs protection**
- (5) Laws that embolden ideologically motivated sexual grooming must be changed, including where children of forced or coerced marriages are automatically accorded the religion of the majority, in addition to laws that allow for conversion into the dominant religion but not vice versa.**

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