

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Pax Christi International for inviting CCJP and me to be part of this august gathering.

I am currently serving as a Parish Priest of St. Anthony's Church in Lahore while I have been the National Director of CCJP for over 30 years.

The Catholic (National) Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP) is a human rights body, established by the Pakistan Catholic Bishops Conference in 1985.

As an advocacy organization the Commission focuses human rights of the marginalized, especially of religious minorities, women and children in Pakistan that involves interventions regarding awareness, opinion building about law and policy reforms.

CCJP carries out its activities through seven regional/diocesan offices in Rawalpindi, Gujranwala, Faisalabad, Multan, Hyderabad, Karachi and Quetta and a National office at Lahore. For its activities in the field CCJP relies on a cadre of 500+ human rights activists (volunteers) belonging to different religions, cultures and administrative regions of Pakistan. The national office engages in lobby and advocacy at the provincial, national and international level with government officials, parliamentarians, religious leaders, diplomats, permanent missions and international agencies, bodies and community.

In 2001, CCJP was bestowed with an International Human Rights award by the Tji-Hak-Soon (Tulip) Foundation of South Korea, for its services in promotion of human rights.

In 2016, CCJP was awarded the Pax Christi Peace Award 2016, shared with the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCPP) for its work on peace and harmony in society. We are grateful to Pax Christi for appreciating and recognizing our work in Pakistan.

Our Aims and Objectives include:

- ❖ To contribute effectively in building a just, human and peaceful society.
- ❖ Fostering and Defending human rights through Advocacy & Awareness
- ❖ To Advocate for the Rights of Religious Minorities in the State of Pakistan
- ❖ To Conduct Study and Research relating to special importance, Human Rights, Justice and Peace.
- ❖ To publicize these studies and reflections in order to create a wider consciousness on issues of Human Rights, Justice, Peace and Social Harmony
- ❖ To incorporate and build linkages with other likeminded organizations, Political and Religious Representatives and Government Officials.
- ❖ To help in creating an environment of communal harmony.

While the Commission focuses on the following Thematic Areas

- ❖ Discriminatory laws and practices (table: total number/ faith based/ geographical) (evidence based)
- ❖ Unbiased education policies, practices and implementation (curriculum) (lines identified) (which policies are violated)
- ❖ Freedom of religion or belief (forced conversion) (lack of amendments)
- ❖ Research and advocacy (publications for provincial, national and international advocacy)

I will not speak on all thematic areas but would like to speak on the discriminatory laws, especially the issue of the Blasphemy laws in Pakistan.

There are various discriminatory policies and laws along with contradictory constitutional articles that victimize religious minorities living in Pakistan. The religious minorities are discriminated in form of bonded labor or low salary wages, religious misconceptions, stereotyping, mob attacks, forced conversion, blasphemy laws and other. The commission has been working to promote the rights of marginalized religious minorities since 1987 from the discriminatory policy and laws, in particular the blasphemy laws.

These Blasphemy laws hang like a sword on the heads of the minorities especially the Christian community who has been a major victim of these laws.

There are three sections of these laws 295 A, B & C. While 295 A relates to committing blasphemy by stating any derogatory remarks against any religion, the 295 B specifically relates to passing derogatory remarks both verbal or written or online towards the religion of Islam and the Quran. This carries a penalty of life imprisonment. 295 C deals with remarks towards the Holy Prophet (PBUH) Peace be upon Him. I say this cause in Pakistan we must adhere to stating this otherwise it can land us into trouble. The punishment for committing blasphemy under 295C carries the Death Penalty.

In our experience of documenting such data, we have seen that 99% of such cases are usually fabricated and the law has been misused to settle a personal score. CCJP has been providing Legal and Para Legal Support to such victims but the situation is becoming more and more difficult as it is hard to find a competent lawyer and even a brave one as most lawyers excuse to take up such cases due to fear of being targeted by the extremist forces.

However the issue is much more serious than this, as when one person is accused of blasphemy then not only the accused but his/her family and the whole locality ends up paying the price. Time and again scores of mobs have attacked Christian Settlements, burnt and looted their homes and in many cases also lynched or killed the victims if they gain access to them. CCJP has been demanding from the government time and again to make changes in the laws procedural and have also formerly asked to consider repealing the law because it has affected all persons and especially the Christian community.

We are proud of the authentic sources of acquiring data of cases and violations from our 500+ Volunteers. Over our journey CCJP has trained over 1700 activists in the past 18 years. Some have gone to make their own organizations and some are effectively contributing to society through different means in their respective professions.

The state of fear that has been infused due to these laws and the lack of seriousness by the State to address this issue have also caused several minorities and especially Christians to flee from the country and seek other alternatives, either by migration or by seeking asylum in places like Thailand, Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

Thus we do hope that in the coming time the state will realize the gravity of the damage that these laws and our weak judicial system has had on Pakistani Society and will come to terms with addressing this burning issue.

With respect to Gender Equality and Human Rights I would like to state the following:

We as in Pakistan is unfortunately a male dominated society and so this phenomena is very strong in our culture, as a result of which women are not provided equal status and opportunities.

Even the issue of Honor killing is something that is very much prevalent in our system. e.g. if a girl goes on her own will from her house to marry, so she is considered to have brought shame to the family and due to this many girls have become victims by being killed either by their brothers or father.

I personally do not agree with the word of honor because in Urdu it is stated as Izzat. Although laws have been made against this yet the government does not have the will to implement it. Then to add to this, killers also get pardoned on the basis of a practice and law of Qisas and Diyat and thus get free by paying a sum of blood money.

This issue also happens in the Christians. E.g. there was an issue of murder between two cousins and when the state was about hang the murderer next morning one night before both parties negotiated and got pardon from the victim's parents.

Similarly in cases of Honor Killings, the father pardons the son and as a result no money is also involved.

Then we also come to another issue where our own Christian girls are abducted, forcibly converted and forcibly married and this is an issue that has been on the rise in the past few years. Due to the weak judicial system and peer pressure the girl cant even return to her parents as the environment in court and outside is made so hostile that she ends up succumbing to that pressure. With the girls and the minority being weaker in society many a times the abductors get away with such acts.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) a recipient of the Pax Christi Peace Award 2016 along with CCJP estimates that a rape occurs every two hours and a gang rape every eight hours. The real statistics are probably more chilling as most cases go unreported. Many victims are shamed into silence for fear of being ostracized by society and thus never go to the authorities to seek justice.

In the end I would like to also mention that we at CCJP do regularly engage with the government and whatever publications and researches we publish, we do we send to all the government and its departments and international community. We also put forward our demands through consultation sessions and lobby meetings with the federal and provincial governments while also effectively engaging at the UN & EU.

Lastly I would also like to lay stress on our Recommendation to the International Community and Policy Makers on Discriminatory Legislation/ Blasphemy Laws

1. We demand an amendment in the Constitution of Pakistan so that it acknowledges the diversity (multi-religious, multi-cultural, multi-national, and multi-ethnic & linguistic status) of the Pakistani society. The Constitution must make no preferences among the citizens on the basis of religion. Therefore; we ask for the repeal of Article 2, Article 31, Article 31-D, Article 41, Article 203, Article 203 A-J, Article 227 and Article 260.
2. We demand a repeal of all legislation in the name of Islam, which has been proven to be unjust namely Blasphemy laws (CRPC Section 295 B, C and 298 A, B and C).
  - a. In case due to public pressure the government is not able to repeal the law, necessary amendments in the Blasphemy laws shall be introduced to stop the massive abuse, we demand that the Government should establish autonomous bodies/ statutory bodies to pay special attention on the misuse of the Blasphemy laws.

3. We strongly recommend a constitutional arrangement to avoid any form of religious discrimination through constitutional amendment and establishing special institutions e.g., national human rights commission, to monitor the implementation of non discrimination policy.
4. Socio-economic status of the religious minorities should be ensured by equality opportunity provided by the state at college/universities and public services.
5. The police or other law enforced agencies should be sensitized and trained on human rights, minority rights, women's rights and right of children in order to ensure human dignity and justice for all.
6. The quota system might be important for equity bases but the government should ensure the minorities and women both are encouraged to apply on general seats as well. In other words the religious minority should be give an equal employment opportunity by the state.
7. In order to establish a productive and result oriented development plan for religious minorities it is essential that the government should conduct the population consensus to gather concert information about the religious minorities and women according to the provinces.

Thank you very much for your patience and time. God Bless you!