

## PROMOTING NARRATIVES OF PEACE, TOLERANCE, AND SOCIAL COHESION THROUGH A LOCALIZED INTERFAITH INTERVENTION IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19: A CASE REVIEW FROM PAKISTAN

**Project title:** Multan Peace Forum

**Implementing organization:** Centre for Inclusive Governance (CIG)

**Central focus:** Counter COVID-19 related hate and discrimination against religious minorities through an interfaith forum.

**Country/region:** Multan, Punjab, Pakistan

**Grant amount:** 10,000 EUR

**Date of approval:** March 2021

**Closing date:** August 2021

**Main activities:** Capacity building trainings with religious leaders, seminars, community townhall meetings, social media campaigns through audio-video materials, development of model sermons, and radio programs.

### Three lessons:

1. It is important to leverage localized narratives of peace and interfaith harmony.
2. Working with different stakeholders and building lasting trust in the community helps to push existing societal boundaries.
3. A combined approach to raise awareness about the importance of peace and harmony during the pandemic by organizing both in-person and online activities ensures greater outreach.

### INTRODUCING THE CHALLENGE

The challenges involved in protecting freedom of religion or belief have changed and grown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of particular concern is the treatment of minority communities which are at risk of being scapegoated or targeted, especially during uncertain times. History tells us that marginalized religious minorities are often disproportionately and negatively affected by crises.<sup>1</sup> Asia's diverse religious communities, often interconnected through culture and language, nonetheless have historically faced specific forms of persecution and discrimination.<sup>2</sup> Several religious minorities in Pakistan have, over a period of decades, been victims of violence<sup>3</sup>, coercion, abduction<sup>4</sup>, forceful conversion<sup>5</sup>, desecration of religious sites<sup>6</sup>, and unlawful eviction from land<sup>7</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic has added several layers of discrimination and vulnerability. Prominent among them are increased incidences of hate speech and hate crimes, primarily through social media.

Jaffer Abbas Mirza, a Pakistani religion and global politics scholar, provides several examples of the challenges facing different religious communities: "From referring to the virus as "the Shia virus" to requiring Christians to recite the kalima to receive aid to denying ration bags to the Hindu community in Lyari after seeing their national identity cards." Overall, scholars and activists note

<sup>1</sup> <https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PaperDetails/58538>

<sup>2</sup> Neo, Jaclyn L. 2021. Religious Minorities in Asia: Between the Scylla of Minority Protection and Charybdis of Religious Freedom Rights? Religions 12: 881. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12100881>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ucanews.com/news/a-grim-year-for-pakistans-persecuted-religious-minorities/91029>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2020/09/27/the-disappearing-religious-minority-women-and-girls-in-pakistan/?sh=17c3c47920f2>

<sup>5</sup> <https://asiatimes.com/2019/03/forced-conversions-hit-pakistani-minorities/>

<sup>6</sup> <http://hrcommittee.org/2017/09/28/minorities-worship-places-under-constant-attack-in-pakistan/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=5331>

## **CASE REVIEW Promoting narratives of peace, tolerance, and social cohesion through a localized interfaith intervention in the context of COVID-19: a case review from Pakistan**

recent heightened tensions across the South Asia region.<sup>8</sup> Governments and civil society groups are working to build or rebuild trust among minorities, addressing the various cracks and fissures in the societies. For example, Pakistan's government has taken measures to establish interfaith harmony councils at the local, provincial, and national levels to "promote dialogue and resolve sectarian conflicts."<sup>9</sup>

AHA! small grant recipients work to address specific impacts of COVID-19 in South Asia, with a focus on threats to social cohesion, the spread of hate speech and misinformation, and the pandemic's distinctive religious and gender dimensions. This case review explores the impact and approach of one grant recipient, highlighting lessons for peacebuilding practitioners on possible ways to address hate speech among religious minorities in other contexts.

This case review highlights the activities of a civil society initiative to strengthen narratives centered on peace, tolerance, and social cohesion in Multan, Pakistan, in the context of the pandemic. Civil society groups are working to equip Pakistani religious and youth leaders to counter on/offline hate and build peace through dialogue and education. The Centre for Inclusive Governance (CIG), a nonprofit that focuses on social justice issues in Pakistan, is one such initiative. With support from an AHA! Project small grant, CIG established a participatory and interfaith committee, Multan Peace Forum (MPF), to increase their ability to counter the COVID19 related hate and discrimination against religious minorities in District Multan-- Pakistan's 7th largest city and one of the major cultural and economic centers of Southern Punjab. The committee is comprised of 20 members, with representation from all major religious groups, youth leaders, civil society, women, and lawyers. Its leaders come from both Sunni and Shia traditions, Christian and Hindu, and represent both women, and youth interests. The main goal is to discuss, review, monitor, and act on the existing state of hate and discrimination against religious minorities during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **CONTEXT FOR THE CASE REVIEW**

Pakistan has a long history of different forms of sectarian tension and violence, which have increased during the pandemic. In the early stages of the pandemic misinformation spread against Pakistan's most persecuted religious community,<sup>10</sup> the Hazara Shias in Balochistan province. Hazaras were blamed directly for bringing and spreading the virus in Pakistan. A leaked WhatsApp conversation between two unidentified persons in Quetta, Pakistan revealed the nature and direction of scapegoating of the Hazaras, "These Hazaras go to Iran and bring viruses to Pakistan."<sup>11</sup> Soon, COVID-19 was called the "Shia Virus" by members of Sunni majority on social media, jeopardizing the safety and security of the 16 million strong Shia population (approximately 10–15% of Pakistan's total Muslim population). Shias, particularly Hazaras, have long been vilified as a community for their distinct religious beliefs and practices, targeted for various forms of hate speech. This has taken the form of indoctrination campaigns in mosques, schools, public spaces, and, increasingly, on social media over recent decades.<sup>12</sup> The Ahmadiyya community has also faced heightened online hatred during the pandemic, with anti-Ahmadi Twitter posts "trending" in Pakistan.<sup>13</sup>

Pakistan's Hindus and Christians also face persecution, humiliation, and discrimination. Hindus have reportedly been denied COVID-19 relief and Christians asked to convert before they could get assistance.<sup>14</sup> Thus among the complex factors contributing to rifts in society and inter-group tensions, many are bound up in relationships among religious as well as ethnic communities and specific movements. Jaffer Abbas Mirza discerns a disturbing and potentially worrisome trend: "An important factor that helps to explain the discrimination against religious minorities during a relief drive is the rising presence of religious hardliners or intolerant groups in philanthropic organizations like [Saylani Welfare Trust] SWT, which are often religious-based but operationally pluralistic. Both in Karachi and Kasur, a common element of discrimination has been the dominant role of local religious clerics who influenced volunteers and differentiated on religious grounds."

<sup>8</sup> See for example <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/04/south-asia-covid-19-hits-marginalized-hardest-as-pandemic-used-to-escalate-repression/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CIn%202020%2C%20COVID%2D19,Amnesty%20International's%20Asia%2DPacific%20Director.https://minorityrights.org/2020/04/29/south-asia-minorities-report/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/-pakistan-setting-up-interfaith-harmony-bodies-to-confront-sectarianism-/2101561>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/apr/05/mass-graves-pakistan-shia-minority-hazara-slaughter-imran-khan>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/pakistans-hazara-shia-minority-blamed-for-spread-of-covid-19/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/shia-and-hazaras/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://ixtheo.de/Record/1739207580>

<sup>14</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/covid-19-fans-religious-discrimination-in-pakistan/>

As a response to the upsurge in sectarian divide, both the government and civil society organizations in Pakistan have identified the need to uphold social cohesion through targeted actions. The government has moved to establish interfaith harmony councils from “the grassroots level to the top, from the union council level to the national level to promote dialogue and resolve all issues among different sects through negotiation.”<sup>15</sup> However, Pakistan’s federal religious affairs ministry, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Inter-faith Harmony, has limited mandates and capacities to address these issues, as they focus primarily on research, training of Muslim scholars, and overseeing pilgrimages outside Pakistan.<sup>16</sup> Long term and impactful commitment to interfaith harmony and social cohesion is difficult. For example, the ministry struck down a bill that proposed to regulate the minimum age for conversion to Islam. Civil society groups have come forward in the past to promote peace and social cohesion through interfaith education and training.<sup>17</sup> The deep sectarian divides have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the rising roles of social media.

**CIG’S MULTAN PEACE FORUM: AN INTERVENTION TO PROMOTE PEACE IN PAKISTAN IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19**

CIG, a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization that works in Pakistan’s conflict zones to promote peace, social justice, and human rights, received an AHA! small grant to establish an interfaith forum and train its members to increase their ability to counter COVID-19 related hate and discrimination against religious minorities in Multan district, in South Punjab. CIG has pinpointed Southern Punjab as a “sectarian hotbed” where social media, Friday sermons, and congregations are regularly the sites of denigration of religious minorities such as Shia and Ahmadis.<sup>18</sup> A total of 45 cases of blasphemy, by CIG counts, were registered against Shias during Muharram in 2020, testifying to patterns of sectarian hate in the area. CIG also observed that “sane voices within majority Sunni sects” were mobilizing against hate and discrimination and promoting narratives of peace, tolerance, and social cohesion, albeit on a smaller scale, through small gatherings and peer to peer communication.



Figure 1 A first of a kind a stakeholder coordination meeting with representatives from diverse faith, age, gender, and profession groups in Multan, Pakistan. (March 18, 2021 / Source: CIG Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/cig.org.pk/>).



Figure 2 A female trainer led session at MPF focusing on countering hate speech and promoting peace in the context of COVID-19 in Multan, Pakistan. (April 1, 2021 / Source: CIG Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/cig.org.pk/>).

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/-pakistan-setting-up-interfaith-harmony-bodies-to-confront-sectarianism-/2101561>

<sup>16</sup> <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2020/05/falqs-islamic-religious-authority-and-pakistans-response-to-covid-19/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.peaceinsight.org/en/articles/an-interfaith-harmony-project-in-pakistan/?location=pakistan&theme=>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/pakistan/>

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CIG proposed to create a participatory space for the local religious leaders from different religions, sects, and gender, under a banner called Multan Peace Forum (MPF), to counter polarizing narratives. Through this work, CIG leveraged their previous work experience to promote awareness about the Paigham-e-Pakistan (the Message of Pakistan)—a recent narrative and decree (Fatwa) against terrorism and extremism issued by Muftis and religious scholars of all schools of thought—among university students in Central and Southern Punjab.

A first step was to select and train 20 members from different faith traditions, age, gender, and professional groups. The members then received training on “Countering hate speech, promoting interfaith harmony and tolerance,” which was conducted by a female facilitator—a rare phenomenon in the context of the project area that CIG proudly notes as a massive achievement.<sup>19</sup> MPF then adopted narratives used by the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) and Paigham-e-Pakistan on COVID-19 and Inter-Sectarian harmony to develop and deliver five model Friday sermons for religious leaders on topics such as COVID-19 best practices, the importance of combating extremism through positive messaging, and the importance of vaccination.



*Figure 3 MPF community sessions on vaccination in Multan, Pakistan (August 4 and 17, 2021 / Source: CIG Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/cig.org.pk/>).*

MPF members took initiatives to organize a range of innovative and impactful activities with key stakeholders, including at universities, madrassas, and religious places. A total of 12 community sessions were held in selected places in Multan, with around 350 participants. Three (a quarter of the total) of these sessions were conducted by the female members of MPF. In order to reach a larger audience, particularly via social media spaces, MPF members scripted and recorded short messages on topics such as the impacts of COVID-19 on social cohesion and the importance of vaccination. The messages were then shared on [CIG’s official Facebook page](#) and via local FM radio stations. In addition, MPF supported the government’s vaccination efforts and organized two seminars on the topic of the Inclusive Vaccination Drive, with participation from both men and women.

<sup>19</sup> CIG maintains that finding women in leadership roles is always a challenge in the peacebuilding work at the local level



## KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM MULTAN PEACE FORUM'S INTERVENTIONS:

- Multan Peace Forum highlights the importance of leveraging localized narratives of peace and interfaith harmony. CIG has been successful in bringing together religious leaders from major religions and sects to create a participatory group around Pakistan's domestic narrative of peace called the Paigham-e-Pakistan (the Message of Pakistan).
- MPF was able to break boundaries around existing gender norms by having female facilitators conduct training sessions with religious leaders.
- By working closely with key local stakeholders, including from universities, madrassas, and religious places in the area, CIG was able to build lasting trust in the community, which then helped them to push the societal boundaries.
- CIG took a combined approach to raise awareness about the importance of peace and harmony during the pandemic by organizing both in-person and online activities. In-person team building along with education and trainings were then augmented by social media messaging and outreach. This blended approach aims to provide a sustaining approach to interfaith harmony beyond the tenure of the AHA!-supported pilot phase.

Through these pilot MPF activities, CIG aims for long-term solutions that can work to establish and build peace: developing and supporting a sustainable network of people who understand the complex local context, are committed to a participatory model of social cohesion, and have training in social justice issues. The expectation is that they are willing and able to continue disseminate the positive messages in their circles of social influence.

CIG hopes that Multan, once known as the city of saints and now reshaped as a sectarian hotbed and recruitment hub of extremist ideologies, will transform back to its historical glory of tolerance and peace. The pandemic that has made the world turn upside down might just work as a catalyst for such change.

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