HOUSE OF COMMONS

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: UK aid to Pakistan, HC 102

Tuesday 29 June 2021

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Theo Clarke; Mrs Pauline Latham; Chris Law; Navendu Mishra; Mr Virendra Sharma.

Questions 34 - 61

Witnesses

I: Asma Balal, Country Director, Marie Stopes Society, Pakistan; Kamyla Marvi, Pakistan Director, British Asian Trust.

II: Professor Javaid Rehman, Professor of International Human Rights Law, Brunel University; Professor Mariz Tadros, Director, The Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID).

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Asma Balal and Kamyla Marvi.

Q34 **Chair:** I would like to start this session of the International Development Committee's inquiry into UK aid to Pakistan. This is our third session out of five programmed. We are looking specifically at the rights of women and girls and freedom of religion.

We are very fortunate that we are going to do that in two panels. Our first panel is Asma Balal, who is the country director of the Marie Stopes Society, and Kamyla Marvi, who is the Pakistan director of the British Asian Trust. I wonder if I could begin, before we go to questions, by asking both of you to tell us a little bit about your organisations and the work that you do in Pakistan.

Asma Balal: Thank you very much. I welcome this opportunity to be here in front of the Committee. My name is Asma Balal, and I am the country director of the Marie Stopes Society, which is a locally registered not-for-profit focusing on reproductive health and family planning service delivery throughout the country. We are the local implementing partners of MSI Reproductive Choices.

In recent years, about 50% or so of our funding to provide services to the most vulnerable and underserved women and men, but primarily women and girls, has been funded by the FCDO. We provide services throughout the country through our clinics to private providers, strengthening their capacity to provide family planning, counselling and services to the most underserved women. With the recent cut in our FCDO funding, which over the next nine months has been slashed by almost 75%, there is a challenge in terms of how we continue service delivery in many of these communities. Just to give you an idea, this will result in us not being able to avert over 30,000 unintended pregnancies and over 8,000 unsafe abortions throughout the country. I will stop there. Perhaps there will be more questions. Thank you.

Chair: Wow. That is shocking, but thank you for giving us that evidence.

Kamyla Marvi: Good afternoon, everybody. My name is Kamyla Marvi. I am the Pakistan director of the British Asian Trust. I joined it around a year ago, just when Covid hit. I am based in Karachi. The British Asian Trust, as many of you probably know, is a charity based in the UK. The Prince's Trust and a lot of South Asian leadership are part of the trustees of this charity. We have programmes in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. A small amount of work happens in Sri Lanka and Nepal as well.

I look after the Pakistan programme. In Pakistan, our two main focus areas are livelihoods for women, and youth and mental health. For today's discussion, among other things that I will be drawing upon is our experience of a milestone project that was funded by DFID, which was

the Women's Economic Empowerment project that the British Asian Trust implemented from 2017 to 2020.

We also work in innovative forms of financing. We are currently working on feasibility for what could potentially be Pakistan's first impact bond. I personally have a public health background and have worked in the non-profit sector in Pakistan for the last 30 years. It really is an honour to be invited to speak with you all today and I look forward to our discussion.

Chair: Thank you very much. This is part of the Committee's ongoing country-specific inquiries. We have chosen Pakistan because it is the largest recipient of UK funding, but also because gender equality is one of the things that is embedded within our commitment to foreign aid. That is why we are covering this this afternoon.

Q35 **Mrs Latham:** I wonder if you could both address what the most significant factors limiting the rights of women and girls in Pakistan are.

Asma Balal: As most of us are aware, in terms of gender parity, Pakistan is not doing very favourably. According to the Global Gender Gap Index, we are ranked 153 out of 156 countries. Clearly, there is a lot of scope to work there.

Speaking of some of the limiting factors, our experience has primarily been in the area of reproductive health and family planning, but a modern contraceptive prevalence rate of 25% is the root of many of these issues that are limiting factors for girls and women. The average age of marriage for women is about 20 years. Even before that, because of the various social and cultural reasons, and because of a high number of unintended pregnancies and large family sizes, the distribution of resources within the household is very inequitable.

If we look at the development of girls, they are at a disadvantage when it comes to food distribution, allocation of resources, access to schooling, and access to healthcare. Beginning with access to food, in a way that perpetuates the cycle of intergenerational poverty as well. We have these malnourished girls with significant deficiencies giving birth at a relatively early age and transferring a lot of those deficiencies to their children. They get into a situation of early marriage in which there is a power imbalance that has a direct implication on spousal communication. They have a number of unintended pregnancies due to various factors, not least of which is lack of access to high-quality services. I would say that access to high-quality, modern contraception, and addressing the unmet need of girls in particular, but couples in general, for their desired family size, is one of the contributing factors.

Q36 **Mrs Latham:** Thank you. I just wanted to come back on that. Could you just clarify, Asma, what was the average age of marriage? Did you say it was 20?

Asma Balal: Yes. It is 20.5 to be precise, yes.

Q37 **Mrs Latham:** That has gone up significantly, has it not? It used to be much younger than that.

Asma Balal: Yes.

Q38 **Mrs Latham:** I have witnessed the work that Marie Stopes has done in Pakistan on previous visits. It has been very impressive. The cuts that we are experiencing are going to have a significant impact on the women who will no longer get the services that you provide. I am interested to hear about the malnutrition of girls because of the inequalities within the household. Is there a lot of stunting within Pakistan, therefore keeping those girls out of a proper economic market and perpetuating the downward spiral for them?

Asma Balal: Yes. Unfortunately, those stunting figures are also quite sobering. Depending on which definition we use of stunting or wasting, about 38% of children under 5 are stunted. That includes both physical and mental development challenges. Although I do not have the figure with me right now, we can safely assume that at least 50% of those are girls. Why reproductive health and family planning services are so critical, especially with the recent project where we faced the funding cuts and we were also just beginning to focus on adolescents and young girls, is the counselling. We were just telling them about a balanced diet and prescribing the requisite vitamins and supplements and addressing iron deficiency in the antenatal care visits, and creating that level of awareness. This awareness has to be created when they are still young and not married. That is the time to start sensitising both girls and boys. In terms of malnutrition, when we talk about inequity at the household level in terms of distribution of resources, girls are worse off in many settings.

Kamyla Marvi: I completely agree with everything Asma has said. I just wanted to add a few points to the subjects that she has touched upon, and then I would like to focus my answer on the economic empowerment aspect. In terms of the broader issues around girls' and women's rights, we cannot ignore the fact that Pakistan sees very high numbers with gender-based violence. That is both within the household and in public settings. It is one of the major reasons why women are restricted from coming into public spheres and, of course, earning money.

The other thing that I wanted to just add was that the latest nutrition survey, from my understanding, is now showing a double burden. It is beginning to show a burden of obesity as well. While we have a whole range of issues around malnutrition and micronutrient malnutrition, we are also seeing a lot of issues arising around obesity. That brings a whole other set of different issues with it.

Coming to the issue of women's economic empowerment, which has really been the work that we have done at the British Asian Trust, we see that there are issues at both levels. There is inequality of opportunity that is coming across and lack of education for girls. Girls' literacy remains, as

we all know, very low. Only 46.5% of women are literate, compared with 70% of men, so that gap is huge.

We also see, in all aspects of life there is a *[inaudible]* on decision-making and many of the factors that Asma also mentioned. None of the critical decisions around marriage, education, choosing a career or family planning are in her hands. Therefore, she has to really just follow a patriarchal system in which she does not make her own decisions around that. That then continues to disadvantage her when she enters the workforce.

As a result of these inequalities, we see that women are in the lowest-paying jobs. Women account for 90% of the lowest wage earners right at the bottom of the pyramid. Many of these jobs are in the informal sector, so they really do not have any structural access to rights. They are in domestic work or working in factories. We had a conversation recently about how it works. There is a legal requirement that after X amount of time you have to formalise labour, so they do not give them a contract. They remove them from the job and within a day or two they rehire them and thus maintain that informal labour force that then does not have any rights. As a result of this the economic outcomes for women are also very poor. There is very low participation in the labour force. In more managerial-level jobs, you see women very rarely. As low as 4% or 5% of managerial jobs are women.

The gender gap is huge. This is even further exacerbated in rural areas, where women are often doing extremely exploitative and labour-intensive work, such as planting and plucking. This is seasonal work. It is often even unpaid work because they are doing it on behalf of the men in their family and are therefore extremely exploited as a result of that. These are some of the issues that I wanted to highlight around the economic empowerment aspect of women.

Q39 **Mrs Latham:** Thank you very much. We have heard how many unwanted pregnancies and possibly botched abortions are likely to happen because of the cuts by FCDO. I wonder if you could both address whether FCDO is choosing the right projects that should make a difference to the status of women and girls in Pakistan. If not, what projects would you like to see UK aid support?

Asma Balal: As far as the current project is concerned, the biggest investment in Pakistan by FCDO right now is under the DAFPAK project that focuses on making these services accessible. If you look at the project's logical framework, the indicators are quite appropriate. They talk about averting unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions. They also measure the savings to the health system at the outcome level, so they are quite appropriate. There is also a special focus on girls' and women's empowerment. Through our comprehensive counselling on family planning and birth spacing, that aspect is addressed as well.

One of the things that I would like to highlight that makes it rather unfortunate that we are faced with the cut at this stage is the increasing emphasis on youth, adolescents, their rights and the rights of young girls. Even within the reproductive health project, there was a huge component of women's economic empowerment. For example, under the DAFPAK project, Marie Stopes employs more than 350 field health educators who are women who have perhaps attended up to grade 10 of high school level. They have very limited opportunities for employment in their communities, but we recruited and trained them to engage with the women and their gatekeepers at the doorstep. They became the social agents of change in their communities. These women who previously did not have any employment opportunities, or at least most of them had very limited opportunities, now became very respected members of the community. They were commanding respect from the men and the in-laws, who are the gatekeepers when it comes to reproductive health choices as well.

The project indicators were quite appropriate and they were measuring the right things. The timing of the project was also very good in that this is the time when we have the political commitment for family planning programmes at the highest level. Right from the head of the state to the head of the Government, all have expressed commitment to this, but service delivery is still where we are failing our communities. This project is plugging that gap by making high-quality services available both in the public and the private sectors.

Kamyla Marvi: In preparation for this question, I was looking at the broader portfolio over the last couple of years of DFID, and now FCDO. I clearly see a focus on girls' education. In Sindh and KP, we have seen large infrastructure programmes that are helping education streams for us. We have seen health programmes and economic empowerment programmes. Broadly speaking, these are the areas where women are the most marginalised. In terms of the broad sector, these are the right places to be for FCDO.

The programme that was supported by DFID at the time for the British Asian Trust was Women's Economic Empowerment. It was supported from 2017 to 2020. This programme successfully resulted in more than 10,000 women having increased earnings. As the British Asian Trust, we also have a very strong focus on outcomes, and that was supported by this project. That resulted in sustainable transformation for the women towards the end of the project. Covid hit, but we saw that some of the results of this project enabled the women to better cope with Covid when it hit. It definitely feels like we were in the right place with this project in addressing many of the economic inequalities that women face.

Chair: I have to be the mean Chair now and say we are 50% through our time and just about to start question 3. What you are saying is incredibly interesting and informative, but maybe we can follow up some of the things in writing so that we can get more of the questions covered.

Q40 **Mr Sharma:** I will put the question straight. Are UK aid projects effective at achieving their objectives?

Kamyla Marvi: As I mentioned earlier, we successfully achieved all the planned outcomes of our project. The only part that had sightly underachieved did so because Covid had hit. In the last year, many of the households had gone into lockdown and could not participate to the full level, yet we achieved 95% of the targets even in that.

We have also evidenced a strong focus on monitoring, evaluation and learning within the projects. MEL is very strong within our project, and that was part of the design that was put together during the early stages of the project when we were designing. Also, on a periodic basis, I just want to quickly say that one piece that really underlined the success of our project was the opportunity to continuously iterate and redesign as the project went on based on the realities on the ground. That flexible support from FCDO has resulted in very strong results for the programme.

Asma Balal: I would certainly agree with Kamyla in terms of the flexible approach and responding to the emerging needs on the ground. In terms of the project achieving its objectives, the first reproductive health project in 2012 overachieved on all the logical framework indicators. The current project DAFPAK, which has faced a funding cut, is already overachieving on all the indicators. Yes, the project has been successfully achieving all the results laid out.

Q41 **Mr Sharma:** Kamyla, there are a lot of expectations on you from the British Asian Trust point of view as the well as the community point of view. It was unfortunate that, when you joined your post, that was just around Covid time. I hope that you have all the successes and meet the standards they expect. Can I ask who sets the objectives and how we measure those successes?

Kamyla Marvi: When we design our programmes at the British Asian Trust, we work with implementing partners. The implementing partners are usually based in communities where they have been working for a fair amount of time. Our choice of partner is very much based on their level of integration into communities and their track record in doing the work that they have been doing. When we design, we work from the level of consultation with the beneficiaries of previous programmes and learnings from our previous programmes. We conduct evaluations all the way and look to what are some of the interests of our donors if they have certain specific areas of interest. Our programme has been based in economic empowerment. That is where our interest and focus lie. It really is a multidimensional process of designing our programmes.

Asma Balal: Just very quickly, the inception period of the project is a collaborative process. In terms of measuring, FCDO commissions third-party independent audits and monitoring to verify the results. Thank you.

Q42 **Mr Sharma:** Thank you. My next question is, are UK aid funded programmes reaching the most vulnerable and marginalised women in Pakistan?

Asma Balal: Yes, indeed. As far as the reproductive health project that Marie Stopes was implementing is concerned, we had a prepaid voucher programme, and the vouchers were funded by FCDO. That enabled women who could not afford it to get a free family planning service of their choice at the point of service delivery. They otherwise would have to pay out of pocket and, in many cases, that poses a financial burden. Yes, in terms of the economically distressed and underserved, the project is reaching the poorest of the poor. The same goes for the mobile vans that go out in areas where there are no static facilities and where we are the only providers bringing these services.

Kamyla Marvi: The beneficiaries of the women's empowerment project were based in both urban and rural communities. In urban communities, they had an average income of around £50 to £100 per month per household, so they definitely were amongst the poorest. Rural communities had even lower income levels in Punjab. The majority of the beneficiaries of our project tend to be uneducated with almost no literacy, but maximum up to secondary education.

However, I just want to add here that we face some challenges in reaching the very poorest. We have found that women who are among the poorest find it difficult to invest time in their own learning and opportunities for training because they are just so caught up in a hand-to-mouth subsistence that they do not tend to seek the type of opportunities that arise or take advantage of them. They really are in very difficult circumstances.

We also find that older women tend to be more successful in maintaining businesses or enterprises. For younger women, there are reproductive responsibilities that are always a priority for them. In a recent visit, we went into the furthest parts of Thar, which is a desert area of Pakistan. We also noticed that there was a very strong helplessness and lack of confidence. For women who do not have exposure and women who cannot go to market, it becomes so much more challenging to go into enterprise and transform their lives so quickly in the period of two to three years, which is normally the span of a project. The challenges remain to reach the very poorest, but we definitely reach the poorest.

Q43 **Mr Sharma:** What should the UK do differently? You said, Kamyla, that there are some barriers to it, or you are not reaching the right people. Is there any advice you can give? What can the UK do differently?

Kamyla Marvi: There are different interventions when you are trying to get to the very poorest of the poor: perhaps enterprise development, economic training and vocational training. We have them, but maybe the level of success will then be smaller. That is one of the challenges that we are seeing. We have a much higher success ratio among urban

populations, women who have access to markets and so on. In very far-flung areas, for women who do not have access to markets and are not willing to sell to their own relatives and neighbours who are just as poor as them, the success ratio could perhaps be lower.

The other piece that we feel is very important is to set the right role models and get those success stories. It really inspires women when they see their neighbour beginning to earn money and having an income. Even if they are a few small, scattered examples, those are very important.

Q44 **Chris Law:** I heard at the very beginning some of the impact that the aid cuts have already had. I wonder if you could recap on them and tell me what the impact of the UK aid cut from 0.7% to 0.5% of gross national income is likely to have on women and girls in Pakistan.

Asma Balal: I can go first. As far as the Marie Stopes funding is concerned, as I mentioned, right now more than 50% of high-impact work in the underserved areas is funded through FCDO. For the remaining nine months until the end of the project in March 2022, for the next three quarters, we are faced with almost a 75% cut. Yes, there are some impact indicators. For example, in terms of the unintended pregnancies that we could have diverted, we will be unable to avert 30,000 unintended pregnancies and over 8,000 unsafe abortions.

However, even beyond these numbers, it has been unfortunate that the cut has been rather sudden and at very short notice. Obviously, that does not allow for a very responsible and thought-through transition plan moving out of those communities. The way the model works for Marie Stopes is that we go into the most underserved communities after extensive surveying of the area and find those communities where there is high unmet need. We then identify providers who are either nurses or paramedics here. They are the providers who are available here and qualified. We build their capacity and invest heavily in their training, quality assurance, and community mobilisation. We then build a practice so that the uptake of family planning services is improved in those areas.

With such a sudden cut, there is obviously very little time and there are very few resources to look for continuity beyond the life of the project. Yes, the providers will continue to be there and they will provide services to some extent, but quality assurance, monitoring and community mobilisation are the aspects that suffer the most.

Another aspect that was a great component of the DAFPAK project was the sustainability funds. The UK Government decided to also fund some initiatives that would facilitate continuity of programme components once the project ended. It was kind of a donor exit strategy, which was great to have. But again, with the cuts, some of those aspects are compromised as well.

Kamyla Marvi: At the British Asian Trust, we fully understand why these cuts have taken place. Of course, the whole world has seen a major

recession as a result of the pandemic. We appreciate how difficult it has been for the Government to make very difficult and challenging decisions. We have directly been impacted by the cuts. We had the UK Aid Direct programme, which was a grant that was supposed to have impacted and worked with over 1,500 women's livelihoods. That got cancelled. That was supposed to have started in April this year; it is now cancelled.

We have also experienced a delay in the start of our UK Aid Match round, which will impact over 3,000 women. That has now been delayed to next year. No doubt, these will have a direct impact on women's livelihoods. At a time when we expect that unemployment has almost doubled in Pakistan, this is a very serious impact and a serious loss of opportunity to impact women's lives. At the same time, we know that these are challenging times for all countries, and we understand to some extent.

Q45 **Theo Clarke:** I am interested to hear more about the merger of FCO and DFID and whether you think that the integration of diplomacy and aid introduced by the merger is helpful in promoting the rights of women and girls more effectively in Pakistan.

Asma Balal: The relationship with FCDO is primarily managed by the UK office and that is where we get our funding from. I can get back to you on that particular question. Thank you.

Kamyla Marvi: From our side, definitely yes. Diplomacy can promote the rights of women and girls. The UK Prime Minister has directly made it clear that women and girls are one of the absolute top international priorities. That has also come out of the G7 meeting that was recently held. We totally support that. That aspect of diplomacy must continue because Pakistan is a very conservative country. Equal rights for women is a challenge and often the first thing that goes with political expediency within the country.

At the same time, we remain encouraged that there are opportunities that come from this merger. The new Department can have a greater impact on things that matter the most and deliver value for money for every pound spent. We urge the Government to use the merger as an opportunity to be even more radical in the way that development is delivered. We embrace partnerships with the private sector and recognise that a purpose-driven private sector can have an enormous impact on poverty and disadvantage. We embrace and invest in instruments like impact bonds and outcome funds that are the work that the British Asian Trust does. This enables multiple partners to come together to leverage each other's strengths.

There is an opportunity in the merger. We are hopeful that we can still impact in the way that we wish to see.

Q46 **Navendu Mishra:** I will go to Ms Balal with this question first, if that is okay. In your opinion, are there significant safety concerns for the delivery of aid programmes targeted towards women and girls in

Pakistan?

Asma Balal: We have been working in the communities, some of them in the most remote areas and very conservative settings. As such, we have not faced any challenges from the communities themselves. Our experience has been that, if the field health educators, providers, and staff are from the communities, that creates ownership at the community level. There is a lot of acceptance for this.

It is important to remind ourselves that the unmet need for these services is very high. People are looking to have this service. They want to have access to a high-quality provider. Once you create that confidence in the community that you are there, you provide a continuum of care even after the service is delivered. You have follow-up visits; you have field workers visiting them to check up on them. The ownership for these programmes is very high. We have not faced any resistance, as such, or security situations from the community itself. There is high acceptance for these services.

Q47 **Navendu Mishra:** I take your point that it is not from the community itself. In general, would you say that it is relatively safe or not safe? I understand the nuance here and I take what you are saying, but would you say the overall situation is safe?

Asma Balal: Our way of operating is that we take on board all the key stakeholders in a given community. Whether that is village elders, the religious leaders, or the civic leaders, we always take them on board before starting out any new projects. The same goes for the local government, the district government and the provincial government. We enjoy excellent relationships with them as well. As such, in terms of the delivery of these services funded by FCDO, in the last eight years or so since 2012, for example, we have not really faced any significant challenges.

Q48 **Chair:** Asma, could I come in there? In February, four women aid workers were murdered. Did that send a chill across the sector?

Asma Balal: Yes, you are right. Field workers have unfortunately been targeted in some areas. There was a lot of context and background to that. Whenever these things happen, we have very strict protocols in place. Safeguarding our staff and their protection is of utmost priority. We work with the local authorities and take all due precautions. These incidents, luckily, are relatively few. Again, I go back to this issue of community ownership and protection by the community. If the community supports and appreciates the work, then it is usually easier to neutralise the damage from the handful of troublemakers that could arise in any setting.

Kamyla Marvi: I do not have much to add. I completely agree with Asma that there have been no major safety concerns in the delivery of our programmes. I would like to say that safeguarding is an extremely strong and important part of the design and implementation of our

programmes. We have seen that FCDO and DFID have always raised that as a priority. Even during the design process, we have had to submit programme documents. Prior to that, we have also had to submit safeguarding plans. These are part of our quarterly reporting cycles and so on.

At the same time, we have not seen any major incidents coming out of our projects. As Asma said, the few that one hears are few and far between. They are not a daily concern for us in the delivery of the sort of programmes that we are delivering as the British Asian Trust.

Q49 **Navendu Mishra:** Thank you. My final question is regarding the Committee's work on sexual exploitation. If I could ask you both, in your opinion do UK aid programmes have sufficient safeguards in order to protect participants from sexual exploitation?

Kamyla Marvi: As I mentioned, we have very strong safeguarding policies in place. It is part of our due diligence when we are working with our implementing partners. They all have strong policies in place. We have not had any instances reported to us. We do multiple forms of project management, including observation. We have had things in place such as reporting helplines. We have not seen this kind of incident arise. That is not to say that sexual violence does not occur in Pakistan. It is a very serious and grave concern. When it does, we know the challenges that women face around that. So far, we have not come across instances, despite being very aware of that fact that this can happen.

Asma Balal: Marie Stopes has very strict safeguarding policies and procedures that it strictly implements. We have a zero-tolerance policy against any such incidents. We have speak-up posters translated in local languages, a confidential helpline, spot checks and visits that we conduct. Any such incidents that are reported are all investigated. Our approach is that, if the evidence turns up, we try to set a precedent that such things are never repeated. We really implement, in letter and spirit, a zero-tolerance policy. Thank you.

Navendu Mishra: Thank you. The point you made about the local language is really important. The Committee has heard in the past that you get foreign aid agencies coming in and using a different language completely or complicated jargon. That is really interesting. Thank you both. I am incredibly grateful to both panellists.

Chair: Can I just follow on from the questions that Navendu was asking there? We are doing an overarching inquiry into the culture of aid. We are very aware that sometimes aid organisations put forward projects that they believe the community wants rather than necessarily the ones that the community actually wants. I am also mindful that that might well be the same when FCDO is funding projects that it thinks are priorities, but the Pakistan Government or the local people do not. I wonder if that could be an accurate description. How closely do FCDO and the Government link together when they decide what the priorities are?

Kamyla Marvi: As I said, as a result of Covid, unemployment is a serious, grave concern for the Government of Pakistan. The Pakistan Prime Minister has personally, with his own interest, launched Pakistan's largest skill development programme. It is called the Kamyab Jawan programme. It is aimed at young people for the creation of jobs. They aim to go out and create 1 million jobs for young people. In that way, we see that the programme that we are supported for is very much in line with Government priority. The Government also has its own setup of skills and vocation training programmes. Again, this is very much in alignment with Government priorities.

Q50 **Chair:** Would they put a particular priority on training and support for women and girls?

Kamyla Marvi: The Kamyab Jawan programme has a target of 25% to women and girls, so yes, there is. Women's empowerment is a priority for the Government of Pakistan and the protection of rights is a core aspect of Pakistan's public policy. It is not always implemented effectively, but in policy it is definitely a priority for Pakistan.

Q51 **Chair:** Asma, do you see FCDO priorities lining up with the Pakistan Government priorities? is there any tension if they do not?

Asma Balal: I would echo what Kamyla just said in terms of the alignment. FCDO is doing it in-country through its active participation at all the country engagement groups, both at the provincial level and the national level, where there is a lot of discussion and alignment with the priorities. Even in reproductive health, which is a stated priority of the Prime Minister and other political leadership, making these services accessible both through the public and private sector and strengthening both sectors is very closely aligned.

Chair: Excellent. Thank you so much for your time today. It is really helpful to have your first-hand experiences so that we can feed into the report that we are doing. Thank you for making the time. Please, if there is any more that you want to say to us, then do feel free to write in. This is an ongoing inquiry and we would love to hear more about the work you are doing. Good luck with the projects you run. They sound amazing and I hope you are able to find alternative sources of funding.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Professor Javaid Rehman and Professor Mariz Tadros.

Q52 **Chair:** I would now like to welcome our second panel, in which we are going to focus on the rights of religious minorities in Pakistan. We are very lucky to be joined by Professor Javaid Rehman, who is a professor of international human rights law at Brunel University. He is also the senior legal adviser to the all-party parliamentary group for the Pakistani minorities. We also have Professor Mariz Tadros, who is the director of

the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development. Panellists, would you like to introduce yourselves and your organisations, please?

Professor Rehman: Thank you. I will be brief. You have already mentioned that I am a professor of international human rights law at Brunel University in London. My focus is very much on the rights of minorities and freedom of religion.

Professor Tadros: I am a professor of politics and development at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. We are very privileged to be working with our collaborators Minority Rights Group, Al-Khoei and Refcemi. Together, we comprise the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development (CREID). CREID is a consortium that is fully funded by UK aid in order to advance making development more sensitive to the needs of the poor, who are experiencing intersecting inequalities because they belong to religious minorities, they are poor, they are geographically segregated and so forth.

The coalition works in Pakistan, Iraq and Egypt. We also used to work in Myanmar, northern Nigeria, and Syria, but our programme has suffered an almost 60% cut because of the aid cuts. We have had to close down a lot of our initiatives under this consortium, but we continue to work in Pakistan through about 10 local partners that are situated in different geographic areas.

Just to say very briefly, we have had a number of initiatives in Pakistan. One of these was that we extended PPE to sanitation workers who happened to be majority Hindu and Christian workers from the most deprived classes. This was because the Government was not providing anything for them. They were working in morgues, hospitals and so forth. We also extended a water plant that was engineered such that it would not cause people to open taps. It had a foot pedal to expend water. It was in Joseph Colony, which is one of the very underprivileged parts of Lahore that had been deprived of water by the Government.

We have initiated campaigns to make people aware, in Pakistan and globally, of the scapegoating of religious minorities there. We initiated a campaign with Minority Rights Group through its local partners called "I Don't Forward Hate". That campaign reached 190,000-plus, and it was seventh on Twitter on the day it came out. It also reached 1,800 students.

Finally, and as importantly as the others, we also looked into the lived experiences of men and women in Pakistan who are poor in terms of what it is like for them, across the Ahmadiyya community, the Shia Hazara, the Christian and the Hindu population. Sorry to have taken so long.

Chair: No, it is fascinating. We are very grateful for all the work you and the coalition do.

Q53 **Navendu Mishra:** Welcome to both panellists. It is really good to see you both. My first question is, carrying on from what Professor Tadros was saying, how would you describe the situation for religious minorities in Pakistan?

Professor Tadros: We started working in 2019 because the first year we were co-constructing the programme with local partners so that it reflected their needs. Then, of course, Covid happened in 2020. I can say that our partners are telling us very clearly that the situation is deteriorating. With Covid-19, we saw a lot of scapegoating of religious minorities. For example, for the Hazara Shias in Balochistan, we had a lot of propaganda saying it was a Shia virus. They were blamed for the spread of the virus because they were in close proximity to Iran. Of course, we saw a lot of the Christians and Hindus who work as domestic workers lose their jobs with no compensation in very large numbers.

We also saw not just a deterioration in terms of the scapegoating and the day-to-day experience because of Covid, but also an increase in blasphemy cases. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, in 2020 alone there were 586 cases of blasphemy accusations. They were mostly in the Punjab, where the majority of poor Christians and Hindus live, but we also saw a massive increase in blasphemy cases being waged against the Shia minority in Pakistan. We have also seen an increase in hate speech against the Ahmadiyyas. In one case, when we launched a campaign on Facebook, it was a Government policy official who was participating in initiating hate speech against the Ahmadiyyas.

In the last two years, we have seen an increase in three kinds of deteriorations. The first is hate speech. The second is in lived experiences that are differentially worse than the rest of the poor community. The third is a kind of targeting through blasphemy laws, for example, which is particularly acute in its impact on the communities, and not just the individuals.

Professor Rehman: That is a great question. I will just give you a brief overview. In constitutional terms, we have equality before the law, non-discrimination, and the right to freedom of religion or belief. That said, the reality is what my colleague has just said. There has been a systematic and systemic erosion of the rights of minorities and the right to freedom of religion or belief.

If you would allow me, there are a few key points I need to make in this regard. One is that this erosion leads from the erosion of the rule of law and due process rights. That is one. Second, there is a deliberate effort to ensure that the national human rights institutions remain dysfunctional. That has a great relevance to minorities. The National Commission for Human Rights, which is a parliamentary-created commission, has been deliberately made dysfunctional since 2019. The National Commission on the Status of Women remains in a state of paralysis without the appointment of a chairperson. Importantly in this regard, the Federal Government set up what they called a National Commission for

Minorities, but that was through an executive order. It is neither independent financially nor administratively. It is totally contrary to what we know as the Paris Principles, which enshrine financial and administrative independence. The minorities are completely nowhere to be seen in terms of the recognition of their rights.

May I just add a few points on the disproportionate and arbitrary usage of blasphemy laws, which my colleague on the panel has already mentioned? I may just add that, as of late 2020, there were 40 people on death row under section 295-C of the blasphemy laws. You can imagine the extreme gravity of the laws.

Just finally, I have two points on forced conversions and forced marriages of girls. It is a very serious concern that very young girls from minority faiths—Christians and Hindus primarily—are forcibly converted, abducted, and then married. If I may mention the case of Maria Shahbaz, who is now 15 years of age, that is exactly what happened to her. She was forcibly converted, abducted, and then married. Regrettably, the Lahore high court ruled the case in favour of the abductor. Now, this poor girl is fearful for her life. There are apparently charges being brought against her with accusations of apostasy, which carries serious punishment, possibly including the death penalty for her. This is a situation in which she and her family are fearful for their own lives. They have no way to escape in that country. The Committee needs to bear this in mind.

I will just add a couple more points if you allow me. There is a very problematic process going on within Pakistan relating to education. I know that you have had a discussion on education, but the substance of education and what you teach these young minds is really critical. The Pakistan Government have introduced what is called a single national curriculum. It has started at the primary level, but the idea is to take it further to the secondary level by 2023. In essence, there is a substantial amount of Islamic religious content in compulsory non-Islamic subjects. Pupils have to read Islam, even if they are studying English, Urdu or other subjects. You can see the real problems and issues of morality when you bring in religious interpretations on subjects like biology or studying the human body.

These are really significant issues. Finally, I will say that there is increasing repression of human rights defenders and civil society organisations. My colleague has already mentioned that members of religious minorities are increasingly being victimised, including targeted killings within the premises of courts. The right to worship is being restricted with restrictions on building places of worship and lack of action when places of worship have been destroyed by non-state actors. I will end here. If there are any further questions, I will be happy to address those.

Navendu Mishra: Thank you. That is pretty grim stuff.

Q54 **Chair:** I wonder, panellists, is religious extremism increasing or

decreasing at the moment in your opinion?

Professor Tadros: I will draw on the evidence that we have collected from the lived experiences of men and women that our partners have undertaken the research with, and then I will talk about the macro level. They are reporting that there is an emboldening of extremist actors on the streets and in public spaces to attack members of religious minorities and be treated with impunity.

This is manifest on a number of levels. One of the things that women have complained about is that they are subject to sexual harassment because of the way they are dressed. In particular, married Hindu women wearing saris are being asked, "How can your men allow you to go out half-naked in the streets?" Sometimes they are physically touched on public transport. A lot of this happens before everyone and nobody intervenes to stop it. When complaints are made to the police, they are ignored. In many cases, we have seen that a lot of the hate speech that is now being directed towards religious minorities by extremist factions is going without any accountability. There are no measures. We do not want to restrict freedom of speech, but it is inciting violence directly. There is a link between the online and offline mobilisation of violence.

We have seen in particular the Tehreek-e-Labbaik political party, which has 2.2 million votes—historically, a hard-line party such as that would not have been taken seriously. "They won't make it to the elections". "They won't be represented in the National Assembly". Now they are gaining seats. Such a party is creating its following by saying, "If we come to power, we will kill every single person who blasphemes". This is their catch-cry to create a political constituency. This means we are hearing of communities living in total fear. Anyone can be accused of blasphemy, a witch hunt can start and no action will happen. The worst thing—the catastrophic situation—is that if you suddenly decide, "We will eliminate blasphemy law", then they will gain more popularity on the street. We need to be able to dilute the effect of the blasphemy law without taking it as a direct target so that they do not gain ground.

The other one is Sipah-e-Sahaba in Pakistan. We have seen a revolving door strategy that has been made possible by Government policy. First, Sipah-e-Sahaba, which was responsible for a lot of the hate against the Shias in Pakistan, was banned. What do they do? They reinvented themselves under a different name, which was Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat. Then this comes under Government surveillance, so they reinvent themselves as another party. Just recently, the Government have removed all the financial and security restrictions on the original leader of Sipah-e-Sahaba, who is also the leader of the ASWJ, Muhammad Ahmed Ludhianvi. It basically means that he has a free reign to mobilise people around targeting Shias. That is one of the primary ways in which the political party gains ground.

The Government allows these kinds of extremist actors to operate. When it bans them, they reinvent themselves and the Government allows them

to still engage in elections. When they engage in hate speech, it goes with no accountability. It is just emboldening them on the street more and more to become more pronounced in their targeting of minorities.

Q55 **Chair:** Would you say that their reach and this emboldening is happening nationally, or is it in particular regions?

Professor Tadros: In our experience, it is happening nationally. It really is happening across the board. In the case of one of the parties, Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, when they started these protests against the French case of *Charlie Hebdo* and they assumed national media outreach, people started saying, "This party is defending our honour. This party is representing the guardians of our faith. This party is speaking on behalf of the Prophet, peace be upon him." That is how they then gain a lot of national traction, unfortunately.

Q56 **Chair:** Javaid, is religious extremism increasing or decreasing?

Professor Rehman: Thank you, Chair. As I just mentioned, in my view it is increasing and it is increasing at an unprecedented and alarming rate. As I just said to you, we face a systemic and systematic erosion of the rule of law and due process rights. As you know, when fundamental rights are taken away, minorities and vulnerable communities suffer the most.

There is a dysfunctional system. The court structure, the infrastructure and, as I mentioned, the national human rights institutions, which were built precisely to protect vulnerable communities, have been made dysfunctional in the past few years. I also say that there is this element of the youth being educated in a way that nurtures hatred in our schools and in our public discourse. It is shocking that even in the media this hate speech, in one form or another, is happening and is promoted. It is influencing young minds.

To what my colleague on the panel has just said, the Tehreek-e-Labbaik party has relished that environment. It has expanded. It has grown in certain parts of the country where they find a very fertile ground to hate religious minorities. Often, for example, the Hindus are related to India so much that, when anything happens in India or Kashmir, the Hindus of Pakistan suffer. It is similar for the Christian minorities. If anything happens with Islamophobia, the Christians become targets. The media has something to do with the fomenting of this hatred.

I would also say that, if you have a gender-conformity role in society, if you keep saying that women have a certain role in society, that they have to stay at home and raise kids and that they have to have children, it creates the impression in society that women are not equal. They cannot be equal citizens if that is what the state advances. It is very important that the Government start to rationalise how it teaches its young people, how it educates in universities and colleges and how it addresses the situation of its minorities. That includes in particular, as my

colleague mentioned, certain minorities such as Ahmadiyya, Christian, Hindu and Shia communities. At the moment, there is one narrative and one interpretation of Islam, and that is the overarching interpretation. Anyone who challenges it faces very serious recriminations, threats and even blasphemy charges against them. That is the environment.

Chair: Professor, you have made some bold claims and allegations. It would be really helpful if you were able to evidence those in writing to the Committee. Of course, the Pakistan Government are not here to explain their education policy to us. If you could evidence that, specifically looking around the treatment of religious minorities, I would be really grateful for that.

Q57 **Theo Clarke:** Just to pick up on what Sarah was asking, are UK aid programmes making sufficient progress in tackling discrimination against religious minorities? Professor Tadros, do you want to answer first?

Professor Tadros: I want to go back to what Professor Rehman was saying, because one of the key components of UK aid policy is girls' education. Professor Rehman was talking about education as an arena where a lot of the discrimination starts, because that is the first experience that our children are exposed to. From the evidence we have collected across different communities in Pakistan—as the Chair has mentioned, we will send this in writing—girls and boys who belong to religious minorities are treated very differently in classes. They are often asked, "Why don't you convert? You should convert. You are following the wrong religion." Sometimes they are made fun of by the teachers. Sometimes they are not given the same pedagogical attention as the other members of the class. These are all things that have been mentioned to us. Of course, when you are poor, all of this is amplified even more.

We know that there is a very large girls' education programme that the UK funds in Pakistan. The extent to which it is able to reach out to where there is the intersection of gender, religious marginality and poverty is something we do not know. The reason we do not know is that we have not actually done a religious diversity audit on the aid programme in general. In other words, we are not saying that if it is not reaching a religious minority, the aid is not effective—not at all. We are saying that the quality of our aid has been greatly improved by having a gender audit and by being able to know how many economically marginalised women we are reaching. We have that data, but we do not have the data on the extent to which the programmes are being implemented in areas where we know there are pockets of extreme poverty experienced by religious minorities. We do not know to what extent the UK aid programme is leveraging these resources to engage with the kind of policy dialogues that Professor Rehman is mentioning on the curriculum.

Of course, no country would want another external country to tell it what to teach, so that is not what we are saying. What we are saying is that in Pakistan fortunately the constitution says that religious minorities are not

supposed to be taught religions other than their own. What we are seeing is that there is a violation of this constitutional principle. We are not asking the UK Government to press for the external imposition of a curriculum; we are saying that we should implement the constitution that is the Pakistani people's own constitution.

Professor Rehman: If I can just take forward what Professor Tadros has just mentioned, I will be a bit more direct if you will allow me to do that. While individual projects have been successful, my impression is that the overall picture is disturbing. The whole issue of aid is not joined up appropriately and I will give you three reasons for that.

First, I was really disturbed to look at even your own presentation of the facts that you enumerated in your introduction in this Committee. For example, you said that one-third of the population lives in poverty, 22.6 million children do not go to school, and half the population, including two-thirds of women, cannot read or write. That must raise alarm bells in terms of what you have been doing so generously as a country. That is the first point. There are many other things here, and if I could just add one more, the population will grow by 40 million in 15 years. You can imagine the risk that that country has and the environmental disaster that that country faces. There are some concerns about the aid and the ideas behind the aid that is being spent.

The second point is that, as we know, there have been considerable scandals around UK aid being misspent. There are also scandals about partly corrupt practices. There is a need to re-strategise, and I would be happy to give some recommendations, if required to do so. The third point is that, as Professor Tadros has just said, the evidence that we have is that the most vulnerable and the neediest in society are not receiving the benefit of the aid that I am sure you have intended.

I would say that there is an urgent need to reconceptualise our aid programmes, particularly in the post-Covid environment. We need to take a holistic picture to counter the substantial upcoming challenges. I have just mentioned some, but if you have time I can briefly go through those in one minute. For example, we need greater investment in population planning. By that, I mean that we really need robust programmes for population planning. We need to have ideas about environmental protection. We need to take focused steps on preventing child marriages and, as I said, supporting human-rights institutions.

It is also a very important point, if you will allow me, that in all our business there must be a full commitment to work with the Pakistani state and ensure that they comply with internationally recognised human rights, minority rights and the rights of people to live in dignity. We cannot give aid to a country that intentionally violates the rights of women and the rights of religious minorities. That is very important.

Again, it would be important to look at what you teach these young people. Do not give aid just for the sake of it. The content of education is

really important. I do apologise for continuing to emphasise this, but if we do not do anything, the next generation will be raised to have nothing but hatred and intolerance. I have so many other recommendations, but finally I would say that we need to do much more to have robust mechanisms to track and audit our future aid programmes. In my mind—I do apologise for being so direct—the aid is not being well spent.

Q58 **Theo Clarke:** Thank you, Professor. You have partially both answered my question, which was "What should the UK do differently?" I just want to turn to my final question. In your view, are there any safety concerns for staff and participants in those UK aid programmes aimed at religious minorities? Professor Tadros, I know you wanted to add something to the previous comment as well. Feel free to answer both.

Professor Tadros: In our experience as a programme, where we have been led in our work by our local partners, the interventions that we have enacted based on the criteria for success that the FCDO set for us were enormously helpful, because they were led by local partners. They made a massive difference.

In the case of the water plant, where people did not have access to water at the time of Covid, it meant that 4,000 or 5,000 people had access to water. In another case, we initiated a counter-narrative to hate speech called "I Don't Forward Hate". For it to then appear as the seventh-most shared on Twitter means that young people are picking it up. When it is locally led, we know that initiatives are able to make a difference. With the aid cuts, we cannot spend as much as we wanted to and we cannot document the learning as much as we wanted to. That is unfortunate.

I just want to go back to the very important point that Professor Rehman mentioned about the joined-up approach. What would that look like? We have a Department for International Trade that has placed Pakistan under an enhanced framework agreement. When engaging in trade relations with Pakistan and the other countries under the framework agreement, there is an expectation that partners will comply with the 27 conventions on human rights, environment and good governance. The question we would like to ask—perhaps the Committee can find this out—is what is the monitoring scheme for the Government in ensuring that these are put in place? That is where the FCDO can play a role and where the joined-up role that Professor Rehman mentioned can happen. We can provide very strong and robust evidence, not anecdotal evidence, that can then be provided and used by the FCDO in engaging with the Department for International Trade to ensure that there is an alignment between trade policies and monitoring and compliance with the conventions. That is one way in which we can practically take forward a joined-up approach.

In terms of vulnerabilities on the ground, in April this year one of our partners was convening a meeting for lawyers who advocate for the rights of Hindu women who are at risk. This is around cases of forced conversion and so forth. Some of the lawyers who were supposed to

come to the meeting did not turn up. It transpired that the intelligence agencies called up the activists and told them, "Do not go to this meeting".

In the case of some of the women's rights activists who we work with, in one case one of the young women had to go into hiding because in her community they had initiated a blasphemy case and she had sought to defend the person in question and the security agencies went after her. It was very difficult to communicate with her. In other cases, we know that women's rights defenders have been threatened with sexual abuse as a way of intimidating them not to engage in these activities.

Last January, one of the women lawyers who was supposed to come to a meeting here in Brighton, the last meeting we had before lockdown, was detained in the airport in Pakistan and not allowed to come. We are dealing with a lot of women and men who are not famous. They are not in the limelight. These are citizens in very poor areas because that is the bias of this programme. We are biased towards working in the very poor areas in Pakistan. It just increases their vulnerability so much more. We are finding ways of protecting them and we take our duty of care very seriously. Everything we do, we do by taking a cue from them.

Theo Clarke: That is very helpful. Thank you.

Professor Rehman: I repeat again that, when you have a shrinking space for human rights activists and human rights defenders, it has very serious implications, as Professor Tadros has said. Many human rights defenders have been threatened and harassed. In that environment, interventions do become even more hazardous.

What we are proposing is that we work with the Government of Pakistan and with the Administration diplomatically and not in a confrontational manner. There are many avenues where we work together and the Administration are willing to work with us. For example, we can do a lot of work on the subject of the environment because we know that the current Government are concerned about the environment. We have to work on population planning. Unless we have an idea of where we are going, the aid will not be helpful and the interventions will not be effective.

Similarly, we have to engage with the human rights defenders. We should work strongly to protect the agencies and the national human rights institutions that the Government themselves have put in place. We can remind them that the National Commission on Human Rights is an important institution that protects women, girls and children. Similarly, the National Commission on the Status of Women is an important institution. The National Commission on the Rights of Child is an important institution. Through these we can campaign, for example, on preventing forced marriages, child marriages and child abuse.

We can engage quite diplomatically without being so forceful, intimidatory or acting in an aggressive manner. That would be my way forward. Once the environment becomes more collegial and pluralistic, there will be a greater appreciation of what we do.

Chair: Thank you very much. Panellists, again, I am going to put my mean Chair hat on. We are only halfway through, but we have a few more questions for you. We are going to run until about 4.15, if that is okay with both of you. We do appreciate all the evidence that you are giving us, but I would ask you to remain focused.

Q59 **Chris Law:** I hope the professors do not mind me calling them by their first names. It has been really insightful today. I looked at the history of Pakistan and in fact it was the UK that introduced blasphemy laws. We have only just got rid of them in the UK in the last years and in Scotland this year, which is quite a shock. Given that there has been a lot of news and information coming out about the increasing impact of blasphemy laws and, as you said today, about 40 people are now on death row as a result of blasphemy laws being used in recent times, is the UK doing enough to moderate the impact of these laws in Pakistan? If not, what should the UK be doing differently? Can I start maybe with Mariz?

Professor Tadros: I very much love the way you have posed the question by saying "moderate the impact", because that is exactly the strategy we should be taking. How can we make it toothless and dilute its negative effects? There are three things that we can perhaps do more of. The first is that we need to be able to protect those who are exposing cases where blasphemy is being used against people. Unless people have the freedom to collect this data freely, we will never know the size of the problem. That is the first thing.

The second thing is what happens when someone initiates a blasphemy claim. Those moments are critical. This is where the Government can step in very powerfully. The first thing is the protection of people who then become vulnerable to targeting. Just earlier this year, a Christian nurse in a hospital was accused of blaspheming against the Prophet. One of the people who was protesting against her got to the point where he attacked her with a knife. The question is that, given that she is a nurse and that this happened publicly, how is it that actions were not taken immediately to protect her? The first thing is to protect the people who are being targeted and their families, so they do not go after the families.

The third measure has to do with the police force. How are blasphemy cases treated? The key here is to make the evidence to make a blasphemy case very rigorous. What is happening at the moment is that anyone is claiming that someone has blasphemed, the witch-hunt begins and the claim is filed. If we make the conditions for filing a claim, "Show me the evidence that she said something against the Prophet; show me the evidence that she has blasphemed", if we make that evidence provision more rigorous and thorough, most of the cases, if not all, would not be taken forward. If the UK Government are supporting the rule of

law in Pakistan—this is a core dimension of its aid policy—this is a very good place to start.

Professor Rehman: First, thank you for mentioning the abolition of the common law offence of blasphemy in 2008. Thereby, the UK has done what for years it was criticised for. That is the first point.

Turning to the position in Pakistan, I very much endorse what my colleague Professor Tedros has said. I have a few quick recommendations to make to you, if I may, on what to do to help the situation. I fully agree that it is not realistic to campaign for the repeal of blasphemy law in the current environment. In fact, if we did that we would be endangering the very people we want to protect, because there would be public unrest and minorities and other people would be targets. So I would not recommend a campaign immediately for the repeal of blasphemy law.

What I would say is that we have to work with the Pakistan Government. We have to say that the law itself is not effective. The reason why I say that is because, if you look at section 295-C, which carries a mandatory death sentence, it has never been implemented. People have stayed on death row, like in the Asia Bibi case, for up to 10 years. They have stayed in death row conditions, in the absolute worst circumstances where their personal safety has been compromised and they have been beaten up by other prisoners or by security guards. After all these years, when the cases come up to higher courts, in particular the Supreme Court, the Supreme Court acquits these people. There is no point in having a law that is totally ineffective from any point of view, even those people who say that the blasphemy law should remain. In that regard, we should go back to the original law. If you look at section 295-C, it does not say that there is a mandatory death penalty. It provides an alternative for custodial sentences. If we say, "Okay, implement the law but as it is enshrined in statute", that would help people because it would take away the death-penalty threat.

The other thing is that earlier this year the Supreme Court said that the death penalty cannot be applied to people who have mental disabilities or mental health issues. That is the judgment of Pakistan's highest court. We should go back to the Supreme Court and say, "Look, there are many people who have mental health issues or mental vulnerabilities. Make sure that no person is ever convicted of the death penalty where there are mental health issues". That is one thing.

The other point, which my colleague has already referred to, is that we must take strict action to prevent the spurious registration of cases. Once these cases are registered, it is a death warrant. The mobs will not stop. They can come and lynch people. As I said, the Supreme Court has said that in 2018 62 people have been killed extrajudicially even though they were not proven to have committed any offence. In response to that, what we should do is insist that the first information report, which is necessary to register a criminal offence, in blasphemy cases is only

registered with the permission of the state. Ordinary people would not be able to register this FIR, which in effect means a death warrant. Even if they are acquitted after so many years, their life is under threat. That is an important recommendation.

The other one, again alluded to by my colleague, is that a senior judicial officer must ensure that there is adequate evidence before allegations of blasphemy are registered in courts. At the moment, I may not even be a witness, but I can say, "I heard this woman saying nasty things about the Prophet or a religious person", and then the blasphemy charge is registered. Often, when you look at the evidence in all these cases, they are registered on the basis of settling personal disputes and vendettas, anger or just hatred. It is very important that we have accurate evidence to make that law effective.

Finally, I should say that laws should be brought into place to prosecute those people who make false allegations of blasphemy. We heard about the Asia Bibi case; we hear about all these witnesses who said, "She said all these things against the Prophet of Islam", peace be upon him. But what happened afterwards? There is no prosecution for false allegations. Poor innocent individuals are either killed, forced to flee their homes or they are acquitted after being on death row for years. It is very important that the law, whatever it is, is made effective. Thank you.

Chris Law: Thank you. Thank you both.

Chair: That was incredibly interesting. Thank you.

Q60 **Mr Sharma:** Let me first congratulate both the panellists for coming out with very open, direct and bold statements. It is not easy. I must say to Javaid that in a liberal democracy, sometimes we are not seen to be saying these things, but I am grateful to both of you for your openness. To what extent is UK aid spending in Pakistan for the rights of religious minorities in line with the actions and views of the Pakistani Government? You both touched on this area earlier. I just wondered if you had any brief comments. As the Chair said, there might be the possibility of asking you to give a little bit more written evidence or a statement. Very briefly, as the time is also limited, I will go to Mariz first and then I will come to Javaid.

Professor Tadros: I believe that the UK Government's spending on education is very much welcomed by the Pakistani Government, given that the Pakistani Government have a commitment to addressing all education inequalities and that the Prime Minister has come out several times saying that we need to redress the gap between the wealthy and the non-wealthy in access to education and have more children attend school. It seems that part of it is very much in line.

Coming from a programme that is funded by the UK Government—I am very privileged to have had this opportunity to work with Minority Rights Group, Al-Khoei, Refcemi and our local partners in Pakistan—we would

like to see more UK aid being presented to us in terms of desegregated data. We want to know how much of it is reaching not just the poor and women but also how much of it is reaching religiously marginalised communities.

There are issues to which the UK Government have a commitment, such as women's rights, which has a very strong compliance to do with religious minority women that is not very congruent with the Pakistani Government's agenda. Given that the Pakistani Government is now on the UN Human Rights Council, I am sure it understands that that comes with a responsibility to show leadership and to see improvements in this area.

Given the UK Government's commitment to women's rights and redressing religious inequalities, this is an area, like Professor Rehman said, where to need to continue to press. That comes partly through policy dialogues, in which we need to raise questions like why is the police force refusing to deal with cases where the parents go and say, "Our daughter has disappeared. Where is she?" There are cases where, in court, judges are presented with the birth certificate of a girl that shows she is underage, and the judge says, "No, you look like a 20 year-old". We know that some of the poorest women who belong to the Hindu and Christian minorities are unable to get to school but we do not know whether the UK aid girls' education policy is reaching them or not.

There is a lot of space for the UK Government aid policy to do a lot of good. Some of it will be very congruent with the Pakistani Government's policies. For some of it we need to engage in continued policy dialogues. What really concerns me—I will stop on this point—is that we celebrate acquittals, but we do not press for systemic change. Yes, we celebrate when a person accused of blasphemy is released, but we should never stop there. We should seek genuine change in systems, procedures and in formal and informal policy. We can do a lot of good if we persist on that.

Professor Rehman: Thank you very much. If I may, I will take a couple of minutes. I will be brief. I appreciate all that is being done by the UK in terms of aid and the support it provides to vulnerable communities, but a lot more needs to be done. My recommendations are as follows.

First, we should dedicate development funds to educate specifically minority schoolchildren. We should institute a scheme of specialist educational scholarships for minority students and provide professional training to adults from religious minority groups. We are not doing this at the moment. It is not earmarked at the moment.

Secondly, in instances where aid is granted or contracts are awarded in Pakistan, recipient organisations should satisfy established compulsory vetting and monitoring processes, demonstrating respect for religious minorities and religious diversity. That is really important.

Thirdly, when aid goes to the category of religious minorities, this should be added to the data being collected already on vulnerable people, which includes women and disabled people. This should also include religious minorities. It is very important that we have data on how we have helped religious minorities. Similarly, the aid should offer specific training courses for minority candidates under the Punjab Skills Development Fund in co-ordination with the Punjab Government or with any provincial government. We have to specifically mention minority candidates in our scope.

We also need to meet with the Pakistan Federal Public Service Commission to discuss how to support training and professional development of workers from minority backgrounds so they can meet the qualification requirements advertised under the job-quota schemes. Currently, what happens is that these minorities are so uneducated, if I can say that, and their economic situation is so poor that they cannot go to educational institutions. Even though the Government have this quota scheme whereby a certain proportion of quota goes to them, they cannot meet that. We have to target our aid to support education for these minority children and students at the college and school level.

Q61 **Mr Sharma:** Thank you very much, both of you, for that. My next question is for Professor Rehman. Do the UK Government use their diplomatic influence to encourage the Pakistani Government to respect the rights of religious minorities?

Professor Rehman: Again, that is a great question. The UK has been working in diplomatic circles, but, as has been mentioned by Professor Tadros and as you yourself know, Pakistan is a member of the Human Rights Council. Pakistan has ratified some of the international treaties, like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but it has not ratified many others. It is very important that it does so.

The UK must encourage Pakistan to allow Special Procedures mandate-holders to visit Pakistan. They are independent experts. They will go and they will tell us, for example, about any contentious issues such as forced conversions and forced marriages. We need to have independent experts. Similarly, we need experts on issues of smuggling, refugees, migration issues and other concerns that we have. They must do that.

As I have said briefly and as I will just emphasise again, it is very important that in all our business, including the provision of aid, there is a firm commitment that the Pakistani state will respect internationally recognised human rights and minority rights. In fact, I would go as far as to say that there should be a form signed by the Minister to say they have read all the human rights and minority rights instruments and that this money will not be spent in any way that violates Pakistan's commitment to human rights and minority rights.

I would just add, finally, that we need to be much more robust. We need to introduce much more robust mechanisms to track and audit our current aid programmes and the future aid that we do. This money is valuable. It has to be spent for the right purposes. If even one penny is misused, we have to hold it on our conscience and on the conscience of the British taxpayer. It is really important that we scrutinise our mechanisms, even if we have to set up some specialist boards and organisations to hold them accountable. It is our moral and legal responsibility.

Professor Tadros: I completely agree with what Professor Rehman said. There are two issues that we will probably have to incorporate into this. One is, "How do we support the Pakistani Government to create more inclusive politics and society without incurring a backlash?" That is very important. The last thing we would want is for us to be inadvertently, without meaning to, empowering extremist factions to say, "We are the ones who are authentically representing and advocating for religion. We are representing religion and this is no longer a legitimate government".

That is where we have to look at the cases where there has been success on the ground around supporting work on inclusivity. We have to say, "This has happened with no backlash, with no unintended consequences. How can we support and strengthen this work further?" When we started the work on provision of the water plant, it was a colony surrounded by other areas that are Sunni Muslim majority. There were concerns about how we could do this without incurring the wrath of the surrounding communities. It has to be done with care; it has to be done with local partner leadership.

It is possible to present the Pakistani Government with models for ways of redressing inequalities on the basis of religion, poverty, geographic area, gender and so forth. We can show the Pakistani Government that it is in everybody's interests, and its own legitimacy, not to be in a situation where religious minorities are being ghettoised, fearing for their lives and being used as pawns by extremist factions. That is a case that we need to make diplomatically. It is in the best interests of all parties to see a cohesive, inclusive Pakistan, not least for the legitimacy of the current Government.

Chair: Thank you very much, Mariz. Those were strong final words from you. Thank you very much. Panellists, you have been incredibly open and generous in sharing your thoughts on what are very difficult and contentious topics. We appreciate your candour in speaking to us today. Thank you. Thank you very much to all the Committee members and the Committee staff as well.