

My name is Arooj Khalid, I am representing Strengthening and Participatory Organisation, a national NGO in Pakistan working for the promotion of democracy, social justice and peace building.

Pakistan has witnessed an unprecedented increase in extremist and often violent activities, targeting sectarian villages and ethnic minorities particularly Shia, Hindus, Harzara and Christian communities. As per the last available statistics, since September 2011 sectarian village terrorist attacks have approximately killed 292 people while another 327 were injured. In addition to various UN treaties that the government of Pakistan has ratified the constitution of Pakistan clearly states, that individuals from different religions have the right to profess, practice and propagate their religion and to establish, maintain and manage their religious institutions. However, the government has yet to translate this constitution rights into national laws that provide redress mechanisms to minorities. Often times it is the law enforcement agencies themselves who are even unaware or fail to recognise the rights of minorities and as witnessed in the communities that my organisation works in are in fact instigators of violence against minorities.

The current government has undertaken new initiatives that have positive implications for integrating minorities into mainstream society. Including the establishment of the ministry of national harmony and the government's decision to introduce a new bill for increasing minority seats in the national assembly, senate and provincial assemblies. However, in order to further implement anti-discrimination mechanisms, the government needs to design human and minority rights awareness raising campaigns and build the capacity of key public and law enforcement institutions on these mechanism. The government should also ensure that the alternative judicial mechanisms that exist particularly in rural communities are fully cognisant of these national and international minority rights standards.

Therefore with regards to the draft recommendation number 24 while we agree with the content of the recommendation we propose that training initiatives undertaken by states should also encompass the judicial mechanisms comprising of community and religious leaders particularly in light of the fact that these opinion makers are often bias towards persons belonging to minority communities. During the course of SPO's programmatic interventions targeted towards peace building we have come across numerous instances where interfaith dialogues and awareness building amongst community and religious leaders peacefully resolves potentially violent conflicts. We urge the government of Pakistan to take up the responsibility for educating public and law enforcement officials as well as other alternative dispute resolution bodies about the different national and international legislation protecting the rights of minorities. The government should also make human and minority rights education an integral part of school curriculum as well as civil services examination. Community awareness programmes should also be launched to sensitise minority and majority communities alike about human and minority rights.

Thank you for your attention.