



## **ASIA/PAKISTAN - Christian girls, victims of forced conversions to Islam, rapes and forced marriages**

Lahore (Agenzia Fides) – In Pakistan forced conversions to Islam, rapes and forced marriages are on the rise. The victims are mostly Hindu and Christian girls, belonging to religious minorities, complain Fides local sources. This has been a worrying phenomenon for the Church in Pakistan for some time and that the Church is trying to address, looking for the cooperation of institutions but it is an uphill battle. “The Christian girls are the weakest and most vulnerable, because their communities are poor, defenceless and marginalized, therefore easily exposed to harassment and threats. Often they do not even have the courage to denounce the violence,” says a sister to Fides. The sister hides and assists the girls who have managed to escape. “But the trend is worrying: There are hundreds of cases a year registered and those that come to light are only a fraction,” she says. In a society that tolerates discrimination of religious minorities, especially of women, the dominant religion and related social position are used to impose tyranny.

A report sent to Fides by the Centre for Legal Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS), which takes care of legal assistance for Christians who are discriminated against and persecuted in Pakistan, confirms this issue, reporting some terrible cases that occur mainly in province of Punjab.

Sidra Bibi, 14 year old Christian in the district of Sheikhpura in Punjab, is the daughter of a worker in the cotton industry. A Muslim from the village had his eye on her and began to molest her, and eventually abducted and raped her before threatening her with death. Physically and psychologically abused, the girl became pregnant. She managed to escape from her tormentor and is now back, in a state of exhaustion, with her family. Police have refused to accept her complaint and now the CLAAS lawyers are handling the case.

Tina Barkat, 28 year old Christian, was approached by a Muslim friend who, after being friends with her for several months, asked her to convert to Islam. Her family began to read her verses of the Koran, kidnapped and threatened her, and then gave her in marriage to a Muslim family member. The lawyers have a current action to dissolve the marriage.

The same fate has befallen Samina Ayub, Christian, aged 17, who lives with her family near Lahore. Kidnapped by a Muslim, she was forcibly converted to Islam, and renamed Fatima Bibi and was forced to marry in the Muslim rite. Her family reported the abduction but police have not prosecuted those responsible. The case remains unsolved and the family calls for the mobilisation of civil society to save Samina.

Shazia Bibi, a 19 year old Christian from Gujranwala, in Punjab, worked as a maid in the house of a Muslim woman, the owner of a grocery store. The Muslim boy from the shop was in love with Shazia. In agreement with the owner, they held a conversion and forced her into marriage. The plan was successful but now, thanks to Shazia's family the case has ended up in court.

Also, two other Christian girls, Uzma Bibi, 15 years old, from Gulberg, and Saira Bibi, 20, a nurse from Lahore, were taken by force by Muslim neighbours, converted to Islam and then forced to marry in the Islamic rite. The families of the girls, shocked, have reclaimed their daughters and the cases are currently before the High Court of Lahore, represented by lawyers provided by CLAAS. (PA) (Agenzia Fides 13/4/2011)