



## **Women's Rights March**

**7 March 2019**

Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD) organized a Woman's Rights March, followed by a Human Rights Seminar on 7<sup>th</sup> March in The Hague, City of Peace and Justice. The event highlighted issues faced by women from religious minority communities in Pakistan.

The participants assembled at 12.30 in the afternoon at Grote Kerk, The Hague. The attendees comprised a diverse group of people, including from the religious minority communities in Pakistan, the Dutch community in the Netherlands and members of women's rights groups. The participants had taken time off their schedule to support the cause. After lunch, the participants lined up in rows of two and marched towards the Pakistan embassy. 111qs

Approximately 250 protestors showed their support. They held up banners which read "Stop forced conversions in Pakistan" and "Save our daughters", to draw attention to the abductions, rape and forced conversions of women from the minority community in Pakistan. The fact that more than 1000 girls from the religious minority communities are forcibly converted every year was an eye-opener for many non-Pakistanis who joined the march in order to support the cause. The participants also shouted slogans saying "Say no to Blasphemy law" and "Stop forced conversions". Curious onlookers were informed about cases of forced conversions and blasphemy law in Pakistan. The event helped raise awareness amongst the general public about the plight of religious minorities.

The participants marched by the Pakistan embassy to show their support for the cause and then walked towards the Dutch Parliament. After arriving at the Parliament, the participants shouted slogans and a few members from the Pakistani minority community shared their experiences about human rights violations and religious discrimination in Pakistan. The speakers highlighted that all religious minorities in Pakistan, including Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Ahmadiyyas and Shias, face persecution in Pakistan and there is an immediate need for the international community to come together to support their cause.

The participants were then greeted by Mr Voordewind from the Dutch Parliament who was presented with a petition and GHRD's human rights report which detailed cases of human rights violations against women from religious minority communities in Pakistan along with legal recommendations. Mr Voordewind acknowledged the ongoing human rights violations in Pakistan and promised the minority communities that he would encourage the Dutch government to take all necessary steps to safeguard their rights.

Afterwards the participants walked back to the Grote Kerk, after a small break with sandwiches and drinks, the human rights session began. Furthermore, more participants joined the human rights seminar, taking the total number of participants to 280. The Human Rights Seminar began with an introduction by Gerda Havertong who expressed her support for the rights of women from minority communities in Pakistan. After which Juliette took over the moderation of the discussion.

Several speakers involved with the subject of women's rights and/or minority rights in Pakistan were invited to participate in an interactive panel of questions and discussion. The first speaker was Carol Anjum, a 20-year-old girl from Amsterdam who talked about the empowerment of (adolescent) girls, especially in relation to social media. The second speaker was Henna Mathoera, head of stichting Sarita, a Dutch women's rights organization for the emancipation of women from different backgrounds. Ms Mathoera talked about the importance of breaking the silence around taboo women's issues in relation to cultural norms, especially related to the Hindu community. Ms Mathoera believes that if we positively encourage sharing of personal experiences among girls and women, a platform is created where change can be realised. The third speaker was Rubina Greenwood, who is the chairwoman of World Sindhi Congress (WSC) and has been involved in promoting the Human Rights issue of Sindh at international platforms since 1997. Mrs Greenwood talked about the importance of effective international pressure on the Pakistani government in order to adequately realise change in relation to forced conversions and marriages in Pakistan. The final speaker was Esther Das, a Pakistani-born Christian who was unable to freely practise her religion during childhood and saw the devastating effects of the blasphemy law. Ms Das talked about both the illegitimate basis of the blasphemy law, as it is widely used as legal justification for the persecution of religious minorities. Additionally, she stressed the importance of all minorities to come together to raise their voice against the discrimination and violence they face.

After the first seminar, the participants were invited for dinner. They were also joined by dignitaries from various embassies and other international NGO's based in The Hague namely, African center for peace, justice and human rights and African legal Aid. After which, a second human rights seminar was held which recapitulated the event in the afternoon and participants were invited to further discuss the issues at hand. After the second seminar, a networking event was held where participants were able to interact with the speakers individually and pose their own questions. It provided a platform for human rights defenders to interact with decision-makers and communicate their views.

GHRD helped raise awareness about the persecution of women from the religious minority communities in Pakistan. The event also helped create a platform for human rights defenders to interact with local, national and international organisations to share their experience and expertise.