



2.18.16

## PAKISTAN | Sindh Assembly Passes Hindu Marriage Bill

On Feb. 8, the Sindh Assembly became the first province in Pakistan to approve the Sindh Hindus Marriage Bill 2016, which allows Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs to register their marriages.

After decades of delay the bill was passed with two amendments, setting the marriage age for both men and women at 18 and applying the law nationwide. Existing marriages can be registered retrospectively.

The Pakistan Hindu Council and civil society organizations are demanding the removal of Section 12 (iii), which calls for annulment of marriage if either spouse converts to another religion, as it could potentially be misused in cases of forced conversions of Hindu girls and women.

Pakistan has a minority Hindu population of over 2 million people, the majority of whom live in Sindh. Since independence from Britain in 1947, there has been no legal procedure for Pakistan's Hindu community to register marriages or divorces and the only means of official identification is National Database Registration Authority cards.

The Hindu community has faced discrimination due to the absence of a mechanism for registering their marriages, leaving couples without an official marriage certificate. They have also encountered difficulties obtaining passports, opening bank accounts and have been excluded from the benefits of government schemes.

The absence of this legal framework has also been cited as a contributing factor in the abduction of Hindu girls, their subsequent forced conversions to Islam and forced marriages to Muslim men. Dawn News reports that in 2014 the Sindh Government registered 1,261 cases of women kidnapped and forced into marriage. Without proper legal documentation proving the validity of their marriages, Hindu women who have been forced to convert are unable to prove that they are already married. Hindu wives have also been hindered in their ability to legally

claim property after the death of their husbands.

Krishan Sharma, Chairperson of Right of Expression, Assembly, Association and Thought Pakistan, a network of civil society organizations, said, "This is a good step towards realizing equal citizenship as guaranteed under the Constitution and international guarantees, however the bill in the National Assembly needs some amendment in order to avoid any controversial clause causing forced conversion."

Mervyn Thomas, Chief Executive of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, said, "We welcome the Sindh Assembly's decision to pass this Bill, ending a decades-long wait by the Hindu community in Pakistan for the State to register their marriages. For years, the absence of this legal framework has infringed on the civil rights of Hindu citizens of Pakistan. However, we share the concerns of the Hindu community regarding Section 12 (iii), which may be open to misuse in cases of forced conversion, an issue which affects the Hindu and Christian communities. We urge the Pakistani Government to remove this clause and to ensure the nationwide application of this law so that all Pakistani citizens have their rights upheld, irrespective of their religion."