



Making Sense of Violence Against Minority Women: Notes on Skepticism, Discomfort & Privilege in Fieldwork

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What is it like to do fieldwork within a marginalized social group? Especially when you - the researcher - hail from the dominant community? How do you deal with the feeling of guilt by association? And what happens when as an anthropologist



you fixate on social nuances which may not lend themselves to activism? How may your work and decisions in the field further efface certain types of violence?

These are some of the questions I had to deal with during my fieldwork in Lahore, Pakistan in the summer of 2015. I was working on the [notorious 'blasphemy laws' in the country which have received a lot of attention](#) lately as a means of persecuting Christian minorities in the country.

The law which stipulates the capital punishment for anyone who disrespects Prophet Muhammad is widely used to settle personal scores, property disputes, and intersects with routine religious discrimination, poor governance and a corrupt police system to ensure that lower class Christians are its primary targets.

My interactions in the field not only taught me about the multiple ways in which the blasphemy laws and the threat of accusations are used to harass Pakistani Christians but also how other types of violence like forced conversions and abductions work to persecute Christian women. Conditions of social and economic marginality mobilize certain femininities and masculinities while silencing others. In this post I use a particular fieldwork encounter to reflect on the types of gendered subjectivities produced by violence and the constant threat of it within the Christian community. My focus here is not so much on incidents of extraordinary violence perpetrated on Christians by members of the Muslim majority but rather on the selective erasures and mobilizations effected in the aftermath of violence, and the intersection of overarching gender norms and class structures which work to further marginalize Christian women.

During my fieldwork, I spent considerable time at the office of an NGO that provides legal and financial aid to minority communities in Lahore and surrounding areas. Founded and staffed primarily by Christians, the organization handles blasphemy cases as well as those of forced conversions, abductions, forced marriages, and religious discrimination.



One afternoon two middle-aged men walked into the office, as I sat talking to Nadia [\[1\]](#), a field officer at the NGO. She explained that the men had an appointment, and turned to talk to them along with Kamran, another employee. I was allowed to stay in the room and observe the meeting after obtaining permission from the two visitors.

The daughter of one of the men, who were both Christians, had eloped with a Muslim man and converted to Islam. The girl, who I will call Rahat, had sent a copy of an affidavit to her family stating that she had voluntarily converted to Islam. The father explained that she had come home from work, packed her belongings before sneaking out of the house. She did not leave a note or a letter behind. The family found out about the elopement and conversion when her new husband called and explained what they had done. Nadia and Kamran agreed that the fact that Rahat took her belongings showed that this was not a case of abduction. Moreover, the fact that she had not taken cash or jewelry made it hard to make a case that the man had lured her out for her money.

The runaway girl's conversion to Islam was dismissed as inauthentic from the onset and it was assumed that she had been seduced and converted by the Muslim man because he wanted to marry her. The conversation veered towards how she was assisted in her conversion without the knowledge of her family. Thinking aloud, Kamran said that it was very strange how someone could just sign a piece of paper and convert to another religion within seconds.

Nadia replied that signing the affidavit is done 'within seconds' but she must have been in contact with 'these people' for many days prior to the actual conversion. She said that someone must have guided Rahat and given her information about how to convert, which mosque to go to, and who to talk to because an ordinary Christian girl wouldn't have access to this kind of information on her own.

Kamran, picked up the copy of the affidavit and read aloud the part stating that Rahat had changed her name to Ayesha after her conversion. He looked up at Nadia and chuckled: 'These are the names they always use. It's always either



Ayesha or Fatima.’ I blushed and busied myself with my files and papers.

The men from Rahat’s family also explained that they were afraid that her new husband and his family might file a false case against them of threatening and harassing the girl. They assured Nadia and Kamran that they weren’t trying to get the girl back. I silently wondered if that was true. Honor killings and attacks on runaway couples are not uncommon in Pakistan. But given the lower working class background of the men I concluded that they probably couldn’t afford to pick a fight with their new Muslim son-in-law.

Nadia commented that Rahat would come back on her own in a few weeks or that she would call her parents and beg them to take her back – once her Muslim in-laws mistreated her and called her *choori* [\[2\]](#). I squirmed inwardly as I recalled how often the derogatory word is used by Pakistani Muslims, even by so called liberal and educated ones. It was easy to imagine how the slur could be used to torment Rahat. In fact the word is so commonly used that I suspected some members of Rahat’s new family would probably not even understand her distress at being called *choori*.

The meeting was adjourned after Nadia and Kamran told the two men that they would talk to a lawyer working with the NGO and get back to them regarding the steps they may need to take in order to pre-empt any accusations of harassment by Rahat and/or her husband.

To me, the most striking aspect of the entire exchange was the ease with which Rahat’s conversion was invalidated and her agency in the entire episode of conversion and elopement dismissed. The conversion to Islam was swiftly recast as one stage in an elaborate plan of seducing an unwitting Christian girl. The elopement and marriage was then understood as a means to legally access the sexual and reproductive capacity of a young woman by an obviously lustful Muslim man. The girl’s father explained: ‘If a grown independent man converts, then we can say that this is a real conversion. But if a young, single woman of marriageable age converts, then it is obvious that someone got her to convert so



that he could marry her.'

This representation of 'real' religious conversion only recognizes male agency and indirectly that of older un-reproductive women. Young women reduced to sexual and reproductive beings were unproblematically stripped of all agency and any transgressive action on their part was attributed to a kind of false consciousness. To my surprise, no one, not even Nadia – the only woman at the meeting – disagreed with this representation of religious conversion.

The anti-women undertones of the exchange are obviously not particular to the Christian community but resonate with and express the anxieties of the broader patriarchal society. In this particular case Rahat's elopement not only violated communal boundaries but also transgressed gender norms shared across religious communities. In a separate encounter with a young male Muslim lawyer in Lahore, I was told that the law regarding abduction and kidnapping is by far the most widely abused law in Punjab.

He explained how parents of young women who marry against the wishes of their family often file a case of kidnapping against the men in question. Sometimes cases are also filed against members of the man's family. Accusations of abduction against the girl in such cases are unheard of. In addition to denying the agency of women, such narratives posit women as passive victims and deny their subjectivity as desiring individuals. In a society where the large majority of marriages are arranged by family members, such marriages posit a serious threat to the social order.

Reducing such unions, popularly dubbed as 'love marriages', to the deceit of lustful men casts the latter as subjects of desire, women as passive asexual objects of desire and restores the patriarchal worldview temporarily troubled by the eruption of female desire.

The re-configuration of a Christian woman's conversion and elopement with a



Muslim man as essentially a question of masculine agencies and desires, through the construction of women as passive victims and vulnerable sexual objects is critical to upholding what Veena Das (2006) calls the 'sexual contract', the counterpart of the social contract in a masculine society. The sexual contract locates women as sexual and reproductive beings within the domestic sphere under the rightful control of certain men (Das 2006). The young Christian woman not only violated the 'right' of her father to be the arbiter of sexuality by marrying without his consent, her conversion too was invalid by virtue of being independent of any mediation by the male members of her family.

A society structured through the sexual contract is formed not of individuals but of patriarchal units headed by men who have the authority to control the bodies, sexuality and reproductive capacities of women. That 'love marriage' within and across communal boundaries is considered problematic due to its challenge to the 'orderly exchange of women' between men (Das 2006:21) rather than any threat it might posit to the welfare or rights of women as individuals is demonstrated in this case by the father's ambiguity towards his daughter's well being.

When Nadia predicted that the girl would beg her family to rescue her from her in-laws in a few weeks, the father shook his head and said that he doesn't care about getting her back and that she was responsible for the consequences of her actions. The everyday violence inflicted on women within the domestic sphere, which necessitates elopements and clandestine relationships across all religious communities, social classes and ethnic groups in Pakistan, was too commonplace to merit any comment from any of the participants of the meeting.

In fact, the idea that young people may need to flee their homes in order to marry someone of their choice is so unexceptional that most Pakistanis including myself may not even think of it as a type of or manifestation of violence.

I certainly didn't think about it while I was listening to the conversation - it seemed unremarkable to me that Rahat would have to elope in order to marry her



Muslim lover. It was only later when I was reflecting on my field notes that I realized that I had failed to flag this.

I mulled over bringing up this meeting and discussing some of my concerns with Nadia. Was it really inconceivable to her that a Christian woman might actually fall in love – however that may be defined – with a Muslim man? And that the latter may marry her because he too loved her – and not because he wanted to convert her and score some kind of spiritual rewards? If Rahat had married her Muslim lover without converting, would that have validated their relationship? What would make a woman's conversion 'authentic'? In the end I decided to let it go. I was conscious of Nadia's discomfort with her boss's decision to allow me access to their office and archives.[\[3\]](#) I didn't want to risk antagonizing her – I had yet to talk to her about her work with blasphemy cases. In that sense my decision was rooted in self-interest. However, I was also deeply anxious about being blinded by my own privilege. As an upper class Muslim woman, I have never experienced any kind of religious discrimination in Pakistan. Perhaps that is why it was easy for me to think about the possibilities of romantic inter-communal relations.

Nadia with her years of personally and professionally dealing with the consequences of vast inequalities of power probably had a more 'realistic' grasp of the situation. In an earlier conversation, she had related how Christian women are often more vulnerable in the workplace than their Muslim colleagues. Relating her experiences at some of her previous places of employment, she stressed that Christian women need to be more vigilant because Muslim men tend to think that they are more sexually available and hence less chaste than Muslim women.

She also said that Christian women need to be extra cautious in their interactions with Muslim men because the latter are aware of and exploit the fact that the state rarely provides any relief to victims of sexual assault from minority communities. I agreed with her. It is not uncommon to see newspaper headlines on the abduction of non-Muslim girls that are later repackaged by abductors and



their lawyers as consensual relations – even in the case of underage girls – in attempts to escape rape charges. In such cases, the girls’ families are accused of fabricating abduction charges in order to prevent their ‘voluntary conversion’ to Islam.

It is clear that violence against women cannot be studied in isolation and unfolds along lines of class, religion and ethnicity. Moreover, conflict makes certain demands of women and mobilizes particular types of femininities and masculinities while suppressing others. Policing the bodies and sexuality of women continues to be a means of regulating communal boundaries in postcolonial South Asia (Gupta 2009).

In Pakistan the institutionalized nature of discrimination against religious minorities, legal bars to officially converting out of Islam, individual and mob violence against minorities, incidents of rape, forced conversions and forced marriages of minority women have further marginalized non Muslim women.

The violence and discrimination against Christians is so pervasive that fear and skepticism often suffuse and supersede all other sentiments in inter-communal relations. Skepticism is sometimes the only vocabulary available to minorities for the articulation of relations with members of the Muslim majority. Moreover, the extent of social inequality means that individuals come to stand in for entire communities – rape and forced marriages become indices of persecution of the entire social group.

Converted women and their marriages become sites of outrage of masculine honor and religious sentiment. Consequently, emphasis on exceptional violence and histories of communalism within mainstream politics and social activism tend to efface the fragmented and fractured experiences of women actually living amidst communal and patriarchal violence. My own discomfort with the treatment of Rahat’s conversion and elopement but eventual decision to not discuss it demonstrates how vast power differentials between the two religious communities and pragmatic concerns when collaborating with activists help



restrict the real and imagined pain of women to narratives of collective suffering.

[1] All names have been changed.

[2] *Choora/Choori* is a derogatory term used for Christians, especially those who work in sanitation. In a class system that relegates Christians to the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy, domestic and sanitary work remains the most visible marker and reminder of their exclusion. The terms *Choora/Choori* are often used to insult Christians regardless of their profession.

[3] The anxiety was understandable and rooted in the frequent threats faced by activists working with and assisting those accused of blasphemy.

References:

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