

Please hear her cries

Targeted: Christian girls and women in Pakistan are often forced to convert and marry. Many are raped.
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Christians in Pakistan – especially Christian women and girls – live every day under the shadow of threats – kidnapping, sexual violence, forced conversion and even murder.

ACN's recent landmark report 'Hear Her Cries' reported evidence that **in one Pakistan province alone, every year up to 1,000 Christian and Hindu women and girls are abducted and forced to deny Christ** – often under pain of death.

Making matters worse, the Taliban in Pakistan – emboldened by fellow extremists in neighbouring Afghanistan – is increasing acts of violence and intimidation.

Meantime, Christians across Pakistan are still struggling to feed their families after they lost their jobs because of COVID, plunging them into a cycle of debt and desperate poverty.

But you are hearing their cries.

They are not just able to survive persecution but many are leading fulfilling lives, thanks to ACN:

- Help for Christian women – skills training, education, and learning their rights
- Food and other basic provisions for families on the breadline
- COVID-19 emergency assistance
- Shelter for Christian girls and

women threatened with kidnapping or death

- Mass stipends for poor and persecuted priests
- Legal assistance for Christians on death row

Among those ACN is helping is **Christian girl Maira Shahbaz**. Maira is in hiding, having escaped a man, who abducted her aged 14, and who forced her to marry him and convert.

She told us: **“Thanks so much to Aid to the Church in Need and the many thousands of people who have done their best to help us and protect us. I am so grateful for your prayers.”** ✝

You are giving her hope



Vulnerable: A girl at a market stall in Gulshan Iqbal, Karachi

ACN is helping 750 Christian women and girls escape the grinding poverty that puts them at direct risk of abduction, forced conversion and sexual slavery.

Your charity has for years supported a faith and skills empowerment programme aimed at young women across five of the most deprived rural districts in Faisalabad diocese.

Programme coordinator Aneel Mushtaq told us: **“Those we reach normally work as cleaners or maids in houses or in brick kilns and other factories, trying to feed their families, who are entirely dependent on them. They become victims of sexual harassment and abuse.”**

The empowerment programme helps lift the girls out of abject poverty and the risk of exploitation by training them in vocational skills, making very marketable home-made products:

- Candle-making – vital in a region where power cuts happen every day
- Mask and sanitiser-making – critical in the struggle against COVID-19
- Detergent-making – vital for every home
- Handicraft – bags, scarves and other items for daily use

The programme also enables women and girls to deepen their faith, providing:

- 10 Christian education (catechesis) programmes
- 300 Bibles, distributed to women
- 500 rosaries, distributed to girls
- 2 retreats to local places of pilgrimage

Recommending the project to ACN, Bishop Indrias Rehmat of Faisalabad said: **“I shall be so very grateful if you can help us to implement this project which can do so much to empower the deprived Christian women in my diocese. They badly need your help.”** ☩

Thank you for hearing Maira’s cry

“I was tortured and raped. I was forced to sign a certificate to show I had converted and had married my abductor. I was told that if I refused my family would be killed.”

These are the words of Pakistan Catholic girl **Maira Shahbaz**, kidnapped aged 14.

Although Maira escaped her kidnapper, she was quickly subjected to death threats on a false charge of apostasy and for months on end she has been in hiding in one room.

Week in, week out, we have been in touch with Maira, helping her keep faith and hope. Once she wrote: “Please, please get me out of here. I feel like I am in a prison.”

More than 12,000 of you backed our ACN petition for Maira’s asylum and we have held several meetings with Home Secretary Priti Patel, supported

by Parliamentarians and other high-profile personalities.

For Maira’s family and others forced to live in seclusion, we have provided food and other basic necessities – soap, washing powder, toothpaste and toothbrushes.

Last #RedWednesday, ACN launched a special report ‘Hear Her Cries – the kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimisation of Christian women and girls’.

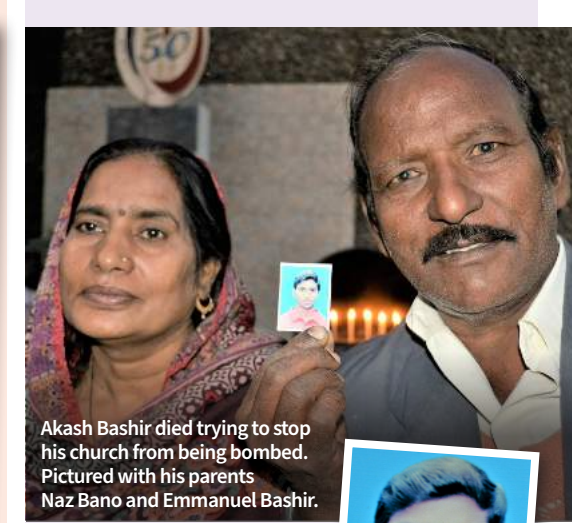
Maira kindly provided the Foreword for the report, writing: **“Thank you so much to Aid to the Church in Need and the many thousands of people who have done their best to help us and protect us. I am so grateful for your prayers.**

“Please listen to the Christian girls and women who are kidnapped and who are forced to change their religion and get married. For too long, the world has remained silent.”



Persecuted but not forgotten: Extremists have been hunting Catholic girl Maira Shahbaz, who escaped her abductor.

- Please support our projects helping Christian women and girls.
- To order your FREE copy of ACN’s report ‘Hear Her Cries: the kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimisation of Christian women and girls’, visit: www.acnuk.org/hear-her-cries ☩



Akash Bashir died trying to stop his church from being bombed. Pictured with his parents Naz Bano and Emmanuel Bashir.



Young Akash – Pakistan’s first saint?

REJOICING resounded across the Christian community and beyond when it was announced that 20-year-old Akash Bashir was on course to become Pakistan’s first saint.

Akash was a volunteer guard when he stopped a suicide bomber from entering St John’s Catholic Church. His actions meant that most of the 1,000 Mass-goers survived unharmed.

Soon after, ACN staff on a trip to the church, in Lahore’s largely Christian district of Youhanabad, met Akash’s parents.

Standing on the very site of his martyrdom, they shared the story of their son’s heroic actions.

Akash reportedly told the bomber, “I will die but I will not let you go in.”

Moments later, the attacker detonated his blast, killing both him and Akash.

The attacks on that day in March 2015, targeting both St John’s and nearby Christ Church, left 17 dead and more than 70 injured.

Seven years later, on 30th January 2022, Akash was officially declared a Servant of God, the first stage on the way to canonisation.

ACN helped restore St John’s Catholic Church.

The charity also provided legal support for Christians falsely imprisoned in disturbances that followed the attacks.

Akash’s mother, Naz Bano, told ACN: **“He was a simple boy who died in the path of the Lord and saved the priest and the worshippers. People love him. Akash is already our saint.”** ☩

Helping Christian children go to school



Christian education is key: ACN is supporting Franciscan Tertiary of Lahore Sister Theresa who teaches youngsters basic numeracy and literacy.

UP to 90 percent of Christians are illiterate in parts of rural Punjab. Girls in particular suffer because of lack of education.

Shunned by society, barred from getting decent jobs and routinely forced to pay more for basic goods, **many parents in Pakistan simply can’t afford to send their children to school.**

With your help, ACN can change this. It’s a problem that’s been made worse by coronavirus.

As Archbishop Sebastian Shaw of Lahore explains: **“Although COVID vaccination rates have increased and attendance in our schools is increasing, Christian parents who became jobless due to the pandemic are unable to send their children to school.”**

The Archbishop, a Franciscan friar, has written to ACN begging us to help 500 children from the poorest families all over the diocese with:

- School fees
- Uniforms – shirts, trousers and shoes
- School bags and books ☩

Give them their daily bread

THANKS to you, ACN is providing food packages to 1,600 of the poorest Christian families worst affected by COVID-19.

Routinely discriminated against, before coronavirus Christian and other religious minorities could often only get daily-wage jobs as labourers, cleaners or rickshaw drivers.

When the pandemic struck, the government banned daily-wage jobs as part of COVID safety measures and so, out of a job, thousands of Christians were unable to put food on the table for their families.

The problem has deepened with many forced into debt to meet daily costs.

In the latest tranche of ACN aid,



Urgent aid: Families in the Diocese of Faisalabad receive emergency food packages from ACN.

the most at-risk families across Faisalabad are receiving food parcels made up of wheat, rice, sugar, tea, cooking oil, milk, lentils, spices as well as toiletries.

Appealing for your help, project

coordinator Salva Rafiq wrote to ACN: "I request ACN to kindly give speedy consideration towards this urgent and genuine need which our poor community face."

ACN quickly approved the request. 🙏



Urgent ACN projects

ACN is committed to supporting these and other projects which have just been approved for funding:

- Food and other basics for **1,600** Christian families on the breadline (Nationwide)
- Skills training for **750** vulnerable Christian women and girls (Faisalabad diocese)
- Tuition fees, school uniforms, bags and stationery for **550** Catholic children (Lahore)
- Training and formation for **307** lay catechists (Nationwide)
- Mass stipends for **98** diocesan and religious priests (Punjab)
- Training and retreats for **37** seminarians (Multan)
- Repairs to **1** convent (St Mary's) at the national shrine of Mariamabad (Lahore) 🙏

Priestly ministry:
A priest visiting families
(Image: Magdalena Wolnik)