

Mariam Masih¹

This afternoon, my husband Yousef, my son Yaqub, and I, would like to share with you our story as a Christian family from Pakistan and how our lives changed forever following a false allegation of blasphemy. Our story is typical of many Christian families born and raised in an environment frequently hostile to our faith. As Christians in Pakistan – regardless of denomination – we daily suffered humiliation and disgrace because of our religion. Human rights are denied or trampled underfoot. Minority women are an easy target. People in the community have a perception that we are low born or untouchable.

In my childhood, my youth and life after marriage, we lived life in fear and have faced discrimination. For example, all the children at school sat on benches but not us – as Christians, we had to sit on the floor. Although my teachers said I was the best at hockey, I was never picked for the team because I was Christian. After Yousef and I got married, we settled in a major city in the Punjab Province where my husband worked in a bank and I was involved in social work and was working with charities. In the midst of insecurity and humiliation, we were continuously contributing to the wellbeing of the local community, educating people, helping the disabled and working hard to live a normal life.

In April 2009, our lives changed forever when an incident took place at my children's school. Yaqub will explain.

Yaqub Masih:

When I was at school, I was accused of Blaspheming against Islam – the penalty is Life imprisonment or death. I was just 13 years of age. I was relentlessly bullied by other students in school who would try to get me to convert us both to Islam – trying to get us to recite the Quranic Kalma or Shahada 3 times to be converted to Islam automatically. But I refused. Shortly after, we went on holiday. On our first day back to school older students came up to me and accused me and claiming that I had disrespected the Prophet. I denied it. I didn't even know why these 15 students were beating me, kicking me in the face and ripping my uniform off. This is until I was saved by my bother and the Christian driver who drove me back home.

Yousef Masih:

My wife and I realised that what had happened was very seriously. In Pakistan, being found guilty of blasphemy against the Prophet of Islam carries the death sentence. We were terrified; My sons totally denied the allegations and maintained that they had never said anything about the Muslim Prophet. But in a school of hundreds of students, the news spread like wildfire that the two Christian boys had committed Blasphemy.

Mariam Masih:

Next day my husband and I went to the school and lodged a complaint with the Principal to the effect that our children had been badly injured by fellow students. The Principal's response was to shout at us. She refused to investigate the allegation against my son and they presumed his guilt. She said that students had complained that my son had committed blasphemy and she said: I don't want these dirty elements in my school. The Principal warned that something terrible could happen to our boys if they continue to come to the school and that she didn't want to get a bad reputation for her school. She struck my children's names from the school register. For my sons, all options for education were immediately closed down. We were terrified. Suddenly our lives

¹ The names of all family members have been altered for safety reasons. Pseudonyms will guard against potential threats to their personal safety.

were in danger. We were constantly seized by fear. Our boys were taken into hiding at the homes of relatives. Overnight, the prospects for our family, our jobs and all our charitable work had turned black. We were terrified especially because defending ourselves against such allegations was very difficult. Would anyone believe us? Relatives and friends were also very afraid.

Yousef Masih:

I took the boys to a friend's home in another city and asked them to keep the boys in hiding. We started receiving threatening phone calls from different people. One threat was that if we don't pay Rs.2.5 million – that is £20,000 in pounds sterling –they would slaughter the children and us all.

Mariam Masih:

Being a social worker, I was responsible for a governmental charitable project of literacy. We had been working in different villages of Punjab and helping poor and uneducated women to read and write. One day I made up my mind to hand over the books to different centres. We drove off and suddenly on the road appeared two men in front of my van. They start shooting at our van with a pistol. I was sitting behind the driver's seat. After seeing someone with a gun in their hand, I screamed and laid down on the floor of the van. Miraculously, I was not hit but the bullets went through our van. I was completely terrified and didn't know what to do. The attack took place in broad day light and at that time my husband was with the boys in another city more than three hours away by car. I was alone in this situation. Police arrived at the scene and start enquiring who did this and what are the reasons. We had UK visas and we were able to leave Pakistan.

Yousef Masih:

The Blasphemy laws and extreme radicalization are swords on the neck of every Christian living in the country. Settling in the UK has been very challenging. We had to make our asylum case to the Home Office, but the Home Office routinely said they did not recognise Christian persecution. The staff usually interviewing us at the Home Office were Muslims and our experience is that it was very difficult psychologically to convince Muslim interviewers and translators that their fellow Muslims had tried to kill us. It took four years to convince the Home Office that we were persecuted and now it's been many more years living the life of a refugee.

Yaqub Masih:

I want to speak on behalf of people who did not have the chance, opportunity or luck to be sitting standing here. I want give attention to those people who lost their lives and those live in fear of it. I am but one of many that suffered but one of a few who escaped. My biggest concern is that it took the government so long time to take these cases seriously. People are marched back to the very place where all that lies in wait for them is a noose. I am not here to cast judgement on the past but to look towards the future for all minorities whether it be mere sects, people with faith, without faith LGBTQ because every human is inherently a child of God. I hope you will heed my words and take them to heart. Because suffering occurs when good people stay silent.

Yousef Masih:

I am thankful to God, Our Heavenly Father, for his blessing. We thank God that both our sons have been able to complete their education. They consider the UK to be their country. Our life's journey has made us strong in Jesus Christ, and Christ gives us the hope of new life and God's plan of salvation for everyone and especially for persecuted Christians. On behalf of Pakistani Christians, we are most grateful for the work of Aid to the Church in Need, the Catholic charity with whom we have worked closely since we came here as asylum seekers. We are also extremely thankful to the Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt for commissioning the review into the persecution of Christians and the UK Government's response.