

"From Pakistan to the UK: A Christian Woman's Journey of Faith, Perseverance, and Renewal"

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Sabeeta Mushtaq MCIPD, is a corporate and public speaker with expertise in HR operations, training & development, leadership coaching, and project management with over 12 years of experience across national and multinational organizations in Pakistan and abroad. She offers training programmes in People Management, Leadership, Change Management, and Organizational Development. These aim to help people achieve significant milestones and foster organisational success.

I was born and raised in Pakistan, a Muslim country, into a Catholic Christian family. Growing up as a religious minority in a society where Islam is the dominant faith was a unique experience that came with its own set of challenges and blessings. Despite facing discrimination and social barriers, my faith and upbringing instilled in me a keen sense of

purpose and determination that propelled me forward.

My early education was in Pakistan, where I worked hard to excel in my studies despite the obstacles. As a Christian in a Muslim-majority country, I encountered moments of marginalization, but I refused to let those experiences define or limit me. Instead, they fuelled my resolve to not only succeed but to advocate for others in similar situations. Alongside my education, I was deeply involved in the religious life of my community, actively participating in youth groups and Sunday School at our local Catholic church, St. Francis Xavier Church in Qayyumabad. This connection with my faith community was a cornerstone of my early life, grounding me in my beliefs and offering a supportive environment.

Challenges as a Christian in Pakistan

Growing up as a Christian in Pakistan meant facing obstacles that were unique to being a religious minority in a Muslim society. Discrimination often manifested in subtle ways—whether it was through exclusion in social gatherings, biased treatment in schools, or missed professional opportunities. As a young girl, I would notice how my peers would distance themselves once they realized I belonged to a different faith. Teachers, too, would sometimes make assumptions about my abilities or my place in the community, reinforcing the idea that Christians were, in many ways, outsiders in their own country.

In the workplace, being a Christian woman brought its own set of challenges. Although I worked hard to reach management roles in some of Pakistan's leading companies, there were moments when promotions or opportunities seemed harder to come by, and I could not help but wonder if my faith played a role in those decisions. Pakistan's workplace culture can often reflect the social biases that exist outside, with subtle but persistent pressure to conform or stay silent about religious identity.

Religious festivals and significant life events often highlighted the divide. While my Muslim colleagues would openly celebrate Eid or other Islamic holidays, Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter were sometimes met with indifference or even hostility. Churches, especially during major holidays, were vulnerable to attacks, and we often worshipped under the shadow of fear. My community had to be vigilant and careful, as attending Mass could

sometimes mean risking our safety. The fear of violence was an ever-present reality, with stories of church attacks, threats, and social boycotts regularly circulating in the community.

Despite these hardships, my faith remained a source of strength. I learned to navigate these challenges with resilience, knowing that my identity as a Christian woman in Pakistan was both a struggle and a privilege. It was a constant reminder that, though marginalized, my community had a powerful sense of solidarity, and that my role as an advocate for those facing similar struggles was crucial.

Professional Life and Passion for Advocacy

Professionally, I found a home in the hospitality industry. Over the years, I worked my way up the ranks, earning management roles in several prominent companies in Pakistan and abroad. My career was not only a source of financial stability but also a platform to pursue my passion for human resources (HR). I have always been driven by a desire to improve workplace environments and advocate for communal issues, particularly those affecting women in emerging economies like Pakistan. My writing on these topics was published in leading Pakistani newspapers, giving me a voice in the broader conversation around women's rights and social justice.

In 2017, I got married, which marked the beginning of a new and exciting chapter in my life. Little did I know, however, that 2020 would bring about an even more significant transformation. Amidst the global COVID-19 pandemic, my husband (who was born in London and is a British Citizen) and I made the life-altering decision to move to the United Kingdom. It was a time of uncertainty, as we arrived in the UK during one of the most challenging periods in recent history—amid lockdowns and the gloomy, grey autumn of England.

Challenges and Adjustments in the UK

This move, while exciting, was also daunting. In Pakistan, I had a well-established career, community, and life. Suddenly, I found myself in a new country where I knew no one, and everything felt foreign. For the first time in my adult life, I transitioned from being a career-oriented woman to becoming a full-time homemaker. While the break from work initially felt refreshing, it soon became clear that I needed more than just a change of scenery—I needed to find my place in this pristine environment.

One of the first things I sought out was a connection to my faith. In 2021, while getting my hair done at a salon, I noticed a church across the street. That church was Christ Church, Isle of Dogs, London. I walked in, said my prayers, and immediately felt a sense of belonging. It was as if God had led me there at exactly the right moment. Though it was an Anglican church, and I was raised in the Catholic tradition, it felt like home. I shared my experience with my family back in Pakistan, sending them a video of the church, and they too felt comforted by the sight of a new spiritual home for me.

Advantages of Being a Christian in the UK

Practicing my faith openly in the UK has been a liberating experience. Back in Pakistan, attending major masses was sometimes fraught with fear due to the risk of attacks on

churches. I remember several incidents where innocent lives were lost to violence fuelled by hatred and fundamentalism. In contrast, here in the UK, I have the freedom to attend church without fear, something I deeply cherish.

The acceptance and inclusivity I experienced in the UK were refreshing. People did not judge me based on my religion, and I was free to express my faith in ways I had not been able to before. The Anglican Church, I found, was quite different from the Catholic Church in many ways. It was more liberal and open in its practices, whereas Catholic worship, especially in Pakistan, tends to be more solemn and structured. I still miss that sense of reverence and formality, but I have come to appreciate the freedom and inclusivity that the Anglican Church offers. One of the most surprising and profound moments for me was witnessing a female minister celebrating the Eucharist during a Sunday service. In Pakistan, the idea of women serving in such roles is unheard of. It was a powerful reminder of how different, yet enriching, my new life in the UK would be.

My involvement with Christ Church Isle of Dogs has grown over time. I began volunteering at the church's food bank, which was a humbling and rewarding way to serve my new community. Then, in August last year, Father Tom Pyke, the vicar of the church, encouraged me to consider serving as a Lay Deacon. It was a calling I had never anticipated, but I embraced it with gratitude and humility. Becoming a Lay Deacon has given me a renewed sense of purpose, and I feel privileged to serve the Lord in this capacity.

A Journey of Faith, Resilience, and Growth

Looking back on my journey from Pakistan to the UK, it has been one of faith, resilience, and growth. I went from a bustling, career-driven life in Pakistan to the quieter, more reflective life of a homemaker in the UK, only to rediscover my purpose in a new form of service. I have learned that no matter where we are in the world, our faith can anchor us, and our sense of community can guide us through even the most challenging transitions.

While I continue to adjust to life in the UK, I remain deeply connected to my roots. I am passionate about contributing to the dialogue on women's issues in Pakistan and beyond, and I hope to continue writing and advocating for the marginalized. My journey, though filled with obstacles, has strengthened my belief that God's plan for us unfolds in ways we cannot always foresee, but in the end, it is always for a greater purpose.

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