

# Violence against Women in Pakistan: Causes, Consequences and the Way Forward

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## Abstract

*Violence against women has become a grave sociopolitical and legal problem in Pakistan. The severity of the issue requires a joint effort from key stakeholders such as civil society, social science researchers, and policymakers to ensure laws and their implementation. Many women are killed, stone to death, married to an older guy, or even murdered due to defaming the family name, i.e., 'honor.' Fisk (2010) calls these brutal acts 'crimes against women.' This paper investigates various forms of gender-based violence and how the violence becomes a tool to disempower women and ostracize them in society. The paper's central object and argument are to theorize the victim's narrative and experience of violence and reveal the various forms of crime frequently reported in Pakistan's newspapers. Secondly, the paper aims to conceptualize the existing discourse and discursive practices of gender discrimination and violence against women and girls. Based on in-depth informal interviews through purposive sampling, the analysis takes the moral, political position. It concludes that society's patriarchal structure is a significant determinant that aids in distorting the humanistic fabric of society. Therefore, the empowerment of women through policy and practice, education and economic opportunities, and legal and political support by the state and civil society is essential to stop gender-based violence in Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** Gender-based violence (GBV), violence against women (VAW), Honour, Discourse, Pakistan

## I. Introduction

World Economic Forum has placed Pakistan as the third least performer in addressing gender-based violence or violence against women. In its recent Gender parity report of 2020, Pakistan has done less than the expectation. The country stood 151 out of 153 countries in the current gender index (Achakzai, 2019). Reports suggest that 93% of Pakistani women experience sexual violence at various stages of their lives (Kazi, 2017). This is an alarming situation while seeing so many different laws and acts have been passed by Pakistan and provincial governments to curb violence against women. Still, the



number of gender-based violence is increasing. In this research paper, we examine historical accounts of an analysis of gender-based violence in Pakistan and use our first-hand data collected through in-depth informal discussion while using purposive sampling. In the study, ten in-depth interviews were conducted in an informal setting with the women in Hyderabad, Sindh. Besides primary data, the authors have looked at the newspapers reporting violence against women, especially news items related to the Sindh province of Pakistan.

At the outset, we argue that there is strong evidence that the cases of violence are under-reported. In many cases, violence against women, especially the domestic forms of violence, is largely unreported. Usually, it is not considered as an act of violence by the families, community, and individuals in a Pakistan's dominant male society. In the paper, the analysis found a pattern of high-profile cases. These cases were reported continuously for a long time; those high-profile cases had connections with political and influential figures, family, tribe, clan, and caste. A majority of incidents were reported as routine news and were not given much attention. In this way, the issue and cases of violence against women show strong sociopolitical and economic factors. For instance, in the cases of love and eloped marriages, the family, community, tribal, and caste determines the crime of violence to preserve 'Izzat' and use masculine power and authority.

Our study shows that violence against women in Pakistan is rampant and has become a chronic social and public policy issue. It is not limited to a particular region, ethnic group, class, age, or gender, but it is widespread in society. However, woman and girl is the most affected due gender-based violence. The existing evidence suggests that law enforcement agencies have unsuccessful to control the issue of crimes of violence against women. In this respect, this study indicates that the current legislation needs to be revisited, and discriminatory and women biased attitudes addressed. The traditional tribal structures and codes of culture and ethics that justify the legitimacy for the violence against women need to be dismantled. The officials of state and law enforcement agencies require trainings using a gender lens, such as gender-sensitive courses, workshops, seminars and conferences. Universities and civil society forums take up gender-sensitive and gender justice pedagogy during their teaching and learning and community advocacy programs, especially by taking guidance or religious clerics.

### **III. Context and Review of Literature**

The academic literature on gender-based violence has focused on understanding the concept of gender-based violence to investigate the issue of violence against women critically. Further, we have also gone through the specific reports on violence against women that highlight the problem's dismal picture in Pakistan. In patriarchal social structures, gender is the central social identity construction to create stratification and discrimination. Baden and Reeves (2000) define gender discrimination as a systematic and favorable treatment toward individuals. Based on the social construction of gender, individuals – in this case, women – are discriminated against and denied their 'rights,

opportunities, or resources.’ In gender-based stratified societies, unequal treatment toward women is the common social norm, and gender determines their role and status in society. According to Baden and Reeves, in the public sphere institutions that mainly include household, community, market, and state, women have differential status to access power and control over resources (p.7). In other words, gender discrimination against women in all institutional spheres also plays a critical role in women’s violence when they assert their rights and positions (resources and power) in these institutional spheres. Therefore, when women maintain their voice or challenge the existing discriminatory gender norms and patriarchal values, they face different forms of violence. In this context, according to Baden and Reeves (2000), gender-based violence is ‘any act or threat by men or male-dominated institutions against women and girls based on gendered social norms. In this way, it is argued that women experience gender-based violence in both the public and private spheres. In a widely accepted definition of gender-based violence, the acts of violence include physical, structural, psychological, and sexual forms of violence. Reeves and Baden also identify the pervasive attitude, including law and justice institutions such as the judiciary and police, that hamper the violence against women. The issue of social attitudes and institutions that devalue and delegitimize women’s lives and problems is discussed in the WEMC<sup>1</sup> research framework’s concepts of ‘meso-level forces and mechanisms of control’ used to disempower women and legitimize violence against women violence in Pakistan. The cultural attitudes rooted in family and community norms (informal institutions) and judicial system and police (formal institutions) are also significant obstacles to women’s empowerment. Many women victims of violence don’t assert their rights and therefore cannot transform and challenge the existing oppressive gender, social structures.

In Pakistan, women victims of violence find it difficult – sometimes impossible – to lodge the FIR against the violations inflicted upon them. The main reasons are the lack of realization among women about the oppressive forms of violence as a violation of fundamental human rights, socio-cultural insecurity due to fear of family/community/caste honor, and unfavorable social and legal conditions. As a result, women victims of violence internalize the patriarchal gendered social structure and find it appropriate to compromise with the existing gender-based discriminatory system. The civil society and advocacy groups working on violence against women believe that most of the violence cases are not reported, mainly in the remote rural areas, due to different reasons. However, the violence against women in Pakistan was reported in print media and

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<sup>1</sup> Women’s Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC): gender, poverty and democratization from inside out’ was four country research Program Consortium/ study project implemented in Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and China implemented in 2006-2010. In Pakistan, the WEMC research study project was mainly implemented in Sindh and Punjab provinces. In Sindh, it was implemented by CHS AKU Karachi. The first author of this paper remained part of the WEMC AKU research team.

published by civil society and advocacy groups and organizations suggest the intensity of the problem (Hadi, 2017).

There has been a surge in the cases of violence against women during COVID-19. Pakistani newspapers report the rise of cases after the lockdown in April 2020. The officials have reported ‘over 25 percent escalation in domestic violence cases against women’ that include over 3,217 cases in the last quarter across the Punjab province only’ (Hakeem, 2020).’ Among various forms of gender-based violence such as ‘Karo Kari,’ ‘Marital Control,’ ‘physical, emotional, and sexual violence,’ domestic violence is the most common form of violence. Aurat Foundation (a women's rights-based organization) report notes that in Pakistan 70% to 90% of women are victims of domestic violence at least once in their lives (Aurat Foundation, 2015). By the end of 2019, police have reported that 108 women were killed in the name of Karo Kari (honor) (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2020). The surge in violence is not a recent phenomenon, but violence against women has remained in Pakistani society for a long. Often, it goes unnoticed and unreported due to the patriarchal structure of Pakistan's culture and socio-cultural context. For example, it is reported that in the period between 2008 to 2014, VAW cases increased severely. The report notes that the VAW cases increased up to 28% in 2014 compared to 2013. During 2008 -2012 cases show a fluctuation where cases increased by 8,539 in 2011, but the number plunged to 7,516 in 2012 (Aurat Foundation, 2015).

The recent publication of Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey 2017-18 has reported its critical findings: ‘28% of women age 15-49 have experienced physical violence since age 15, and 6% have experienced sexual violence.’ The report highlights the violence faced by pregnant women, husbands showing controlling behaviors toward their wives,

In the report, it is identified that emotional violence (26%), followed by physical violence (23%). (National Institute of Population Studies (NIPS) [Pakistan] and ICF, 2019).

#### **IV. Method and Conceptual Framework**

This research paper aims to analyze the forms and intensity of gender-based violence. This paper analyzes the VAW issue based on the In-depth informal Interviews conducted with ten women while using purposive sampling. It was challenging to identify women who could speak up and share their experience of violence. The researchers approached civil society members who were already working on gender-based violence and collected the preliminary data and findings through reports and case studies. The researchers then decided to contact women to seek their consent to informal interviews. Their details, including their names, are not disclosed due to their privacy, confidentiality, and identities. All women were from Hyderabad Sindh. 05 women were matric pass (10 grade) but couldn't continue their education due to marriage. 3 were primary pass (5 grade), and 2 were school dropouts during their primary schooling. Six women were

married within their caste/clan, and four were married out of their caste/clan. Girls arranged marriage in cases where women were married within their caste/clan, but there were 2 cases where women married on their choice and love. The remaining two were married through a matchmaker. 4 women are divorced and living with their parental family. Besides in-depth interviews, secondary data was also collected through random sampling while looking into the English daily newspapers. Systemically, the news data collected on women's issues reflecting the gender-based violence and practices were divided and organized into three forms or categories, namely (a) News items (b) Letters to the editor (c) Editorial. In terms of a conceptual framework, the paper integrates the 'mechanisms of control', 'meso level,' and significantly related concepts used in the Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts (WEMC) Research Framework. In the following section, we briefly present and explain the WEMC research framework and its relevant concepts to address the analysis of gender-based violence and women's disempowerment.

**WEMC Research Framework:** 'Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts: gender, poverty, and democratization from inside out' looks at the issue of women empowerment in qualitative and transformative terms (2007). Addressing the question of women empowerment, the analytical concepts used in the WEMC research framework call attention to contest the gender power relations that hinder women's empowerment. WEMC framework builds on the conceptualization that addresses women's disempowerment by critically looking into the power structures. The WEMC framework critically reflects on the obstacles to women's empowerment embedded into power structures. The WEMC research framework's focus on understanding power structures calls attention to the meso-level societal forces that disempower women. In the WEMC research framework, the understanding and analysis of meso-level power structures come to the fore to investigate and act against gender-based violence and women's disempowerment. In its critical attention to consider the meso-level forces, the WEMC framework further brings out the analytical concept of the 'mechanisms of control' that play a debilitating role in women's lives and make them disempowered.

This paper analyses violence's forms and intensity against women. In the WEMC framework, gender-based violence itself is considered a first and foremost 'mechanism of control' to women's disempowerment. WEMC research framework builds on the understanding that the mechanisms of control used by disempowering forces are situated at and shaped by the meso-level power structures. The WEMC framework identifies

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<sup>2</sup> WEMC Research Framework identifies three levels of analysis i.e., the macro, meso and micro to understand women's (dis)empowerment. It draws special attention to the meso-level forces and power structures to understand women's (dis) empowerment. WEMC framework pays attention to address the power structures. it argues against the insufficiency of policies at the macro level.

violence as the first mechanism of control used by disempowering forces against women. And, it pays attention to gender-based violence that endangers and hampers women's autonomy and agency. In WEMC, violence as a mechanism of control is viewed to have its disempowering force against women. WEMC framework uncovers various forms of violence that may include state-sanctioned violence through the law, family laws, customary cultural practice, misinterpretations by politico-religious groups, which curtail women's rights and position as an individual autonomous person.

## **V. Discussion and Findings**

Women are considered marginalized subjects due to male dominance and socio-cultural customs in South Asia including Pakistan. The gendered cultural norms and practices create and reinforce intense gender disparities that undermine women's empowerment. In Pakistan, the subjugated and subordinated position of women in society marks the main social determinants of poverty, inequality, and gender injustice resulting in the socially undemocratic community and state development.

Women's subordinate and disempowered position can be seen in the day-to-day news reporting of heinous crimes against them in various forms of violence, insecurity, and lack of access to basic human development needs, resources, opportunities, and decision-making in all spheres of human life. In this respect, women's disempowerment, poor conditions, and status need critical attention and public policy analysis of gender discrimination in all oppressive and coercive forms that make the woman a marginalized section of the society. Studies suggest that women's marginalized socio-economic status in Pakistan is rooted in the patriarchal notions and gendered power structures to control them. Informed by anthropological thinking, we argue that society's patriarchal socialization based on the discriminatory practices against women is the primary cause of gender-based violence and gender disparities in women's personal and public life. The patriarchal norms and practices of society assign power and authority to men to inflict different kinds of violence and discrimination against women. The male members of the family, community, caste, clan, tribe, and nation reflect masculine behavior and hierarchical gender relations that centrally discriminate and create a disadvantageous status.

Pakistani women's low socio-economic and political status is deeply rooted in gender-based discriminatory practices and male-dominant normative behaviors. The women's low socio-economic status and position are reflected in the male-dominated gendered system and customary procedures. The gender system defines and determines the women's roles, statuses, and expectations in a society premised on male-dominant cultural and normative behavior. In case a woman breaches or doesn't follow the male

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<sup>3</sup> See in WEMC Process Document 1.2, Jan 17, 2007, p.17,18, it draws critical attention to extremist political Islamist groups that delegitimize women's empowerment in Muslim societies.

assigned traditional roles and expectations, she is maligned culturally and, in most cases, faces the horrible forms of physical, mental, emotional, and structural violence at the hands of patriarchal norms and customs. In this respect, violence against women is reflected through the various forms and modes of structural and cultural violence such as Karo-Kari (Shah, 2017), Swara, Vani - exchange of girls to compensate and settle the tribal feuds- (Tabassum, Afzal, & Tabassum, 2019), murder, torture, rape, sexual harassment at workplace, domestic violence, forced marriages, exchange marriages, early age marriages, and divorce. It is identified that the issue of VAW in Pakistan has roots in unequal gender social structures/relations. In this light, Weiss (2014) identifies two basic perceptions that determine gender relations in Pakistan: (1) women have a second-class status, and (2) she is considered as family 'honor'. Due to this conceptualization of 'woman and honor,' Muslim man constructs the gendered norms and values that restrict woman's movement, confine her into the home, and her activities are monitored so that the family honor is enacted. The second perception links family, community/caste, and tribal honor to women. In that sense, the community and tribal values, customs, and norms determine women's feminine behavior and actions based on hierarchical power relations.

## **VI. Uncovering the Brutal Realities of Violence against Women**

As indicated in the beginning, this paper aims to highlight and document the forms and intensity of violence perpetrated against women in Pakistan. We argue that it is essential to establish a democratic and socially progressive and just society. Gender-based violence needs to be addressed on a priority basis within the public policy and development programs. Because we understand that VAW creates a serious challenge to establish social justice and a democratic society. The discriminatory nature and treatment of women in society result in the repression of their rights and obstruct their role in the state and society's institutional development. We take this political stance to ensure a socially-progressive community, women's social, political, and legal empowerment should be a primary object and priority.

Researchers working on gender discrimination and violence believe that the issue of VAW is an issue of rule law. It is a core element for the survival and sustenance of democratic values in society. They understand that those who inflict brutal forms of physical, mental, emotional, and sexual violence against women find it their prerogative right to use violence as a weapon to subjugate the women. For women's rights activists or civil society workers, the question of VAW is a question of the rule of law in society. They argue that women's rights violation is severe issue that could be seen in terms of society's backwardness. In this sense, for them, the issue of VAW in Pakistan needs special attention to achieve the democratic governance and development in society. For them, gender-based violence and discrimination are a tool used by patriarchal structures to subordinate the women, which creates inequalities and hurdles in society's development process. For instance, to reflect on the question of patriarchal power

structures and women violence in the name of cultural practices in Pakistani society, we refer to and take inspiration from the RPC-WEMC consultation paper titled “*Rejecting ‘cultural’ justifications for violence against women: Strategies for mobilizing state, society and the international community*” (see RPC – WEMC consultation paper 2007, p.3-10). The RPC-WEMC consultation paper identifies that despite the international efforts to introduce and implement international agreements, violence against women is unabated. And, culture is centrally used to legitimize violence against women. Therefore, it suggests the rejection of cultural excuses that justify and perpetuate VAW. The RPC-WEMC stresses the need to expose gender-based violence as a mechanism of control under the cover of culture and patriarchal interests.

We argue that the gender-based violence and discrimination against women result from patriarchal structures and forces intensely rooted in the male-dominated cultural and institutional behavior and socialization. Often, these patriarchal structures based on the interpretation of cultural customs and tradition overthrow the state laws and policies. The manifestation of this tribal and cultural behavior is seen in the gender discriminatory customary practices such as jirgas (informal/tribal form of court and decision-making) in various forms held frequently among the four provinces (Brohi, 2016). Our findings and analysis show that the multiple forms of gender-based violence are culturally determined tools to control women’s lives in the private and public spheres. The data and results of our study reflect that the primary forms of violence used by the male are abduction, kidnapping, honor killings, sexual assault and rape by family/community relatives, ex-husbands, and unidentified persons, and domestic violence by husbands, brothers, and fathers, sexual harassment at workplace, robbery, wife-beating, honor killing, forced marriages, early age marriages, violence to control the free will marriages of women, and violence perpetrated by political Islamists (see in WEMC framework the culture and religion as a mechanism of control) the social mobility of women and girls and female NGO workers especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The main underlying causes of these various forms of violence against women are multifaceted. Still, the main motive is to control women’s mobility, sexuality, and morality and, personal freedom and right to exercise free will choices, especially marriage within the community or outside the community. The women’s individual and free will decisions are considered immoral and disgraced culturally by the male members of the family, community, and tribe. To protect the family and tribal honor, women’s mobility and free will are controlled through the coercive means of physical, mental, and emotional violence. The perception of family honor is symbolized with the honor of the family’s female members.

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<sup>4</sup> In the four mechanisms of control or forces of women’s disempowerment, WEMC Research Framework identifies the misogynistic interpretations of culture and religion used to legitimize women’s disempowerment, and de-legitimize their empowerment. It identifies the way the ‘culture and religion’ are used to deny women’s rights by political Islamists and other patriarchs in Muslim contexts.



The data analysis reflects that the underlying causes and motives of abduction and kidnapping of women and girls are: sexual exploitation, ransom, and taking revenge from the family and community and to retrieve the family/tribal honor and control the free will marriage of the women. The findings suggest that the minor and teenage girls are abducted for ransom and sexual purposes. In many cases, the underlying cause of the young girls' abduction is the refusal of the girl or girl's family from marriage to the accused party. Sometimes, the girl's abduction by the influential persons from her home results in the murder of the other family members in the wake of resistance to culprits. In other cases, a woman's kidnapping occurs when she manages a free will or love marriage. In these cases, the brother, father, cousins, and other family members use the violence as a tool to learn the woman's lesson and to protect the honor of the family. Sometimes, the enraged family members of the 'love marriage woman' take stern action for the sake of family honor and even abduct the couple from court premises. In the paper, we identified the intensity of this form of violence in the kidnapping of a couple in district Sahiwal. The news item reported that within the District and Sessions Court Sahiwal premises, the love marriage couple was kidnapped by thirty armed men. The report identified that the brother of the woman was the main cultural actor who had opposed the marriage. Findings also reflect the cases of women violence inflicted by the fathers, brothers, and husbands, both the existing and ex-husbands, as a reaction and revenge to protect their 'manliness and honor.' In the paper, our analysis finds that the two rival tribes/groups use women's abduction as a tool to show the ferocity and intensity (in terms of disgrace, power, and control) of the revenge. Such cases also involve the rape of women to teach the lesson to the rival group on the pretext of protecting the honor of the accused tribe. For instance, in the news data, the dawn English newspaper reported a case of rape of two women from Muzaffargarh Punjab area in the month of April. According to the report, a dozen or so men abducted two women and raped them in a jungle for two nights. The gangsters, it is learnt, wanted to teach them a lesson because a nephew of one took away a girl of the former's family (Dawn Reporter, 2008).

The analysis shows that the male family members and community who control the women are the recurring theme. The male family/tribe/community members control the women to practice love marriage outside the community. The love marriage, especially the elopement, is mostly considered against the patriarchal norms of the family, kinship, and society. Therefore, women are expected not to breach the endogamous cultural practice. Another major cause reported behind such incidents of abduction of women in marital and domestic disputes. In our data analysis, many cases were reported regarding the control of women by family male members and relatives in the name of protecting the honor of their families and communities. The majority of these cases depict the control of free will marriages of women. Some cases under study reflected that the state institutions such as the police are not supportive of women, especially in the circumstances in which they face danger to their lives at family relatives' hands. A case of an 18-year-old girl who had contracted a free-will marriage was reported from Hyderabad Sindh. It was

reported that she filed a petition to Hyderabad circuit bench Sindh High Court to provide them – she and her husband’s family- protection from the DPO and the SHO. In the petition case, the report highlighted that the girl identified harassment by DPO and SHO. In another VAW incident in Sialkot, the girl, who was eloped with her lover, was shot dead by her cousins. The reporting period under study and analysis also highlighted a ruthless and heinous crime of burying alive the five women in the name of tribal/cultural honor in Balochistan province.

The findings revealed women are forced to sale. It manifests the control of a woman’s body especially for sex work by the males. Findings suggest that the rape of young and minor girls is another serious crime and violence inflicted upon women by men for sexual exploitation. The data under review and analysis showed that the various forms and intensity of crimes against women stem from the cultural interpretation and customary practices embedded into the patriarchal power structures.

## VII. Conclusion

In this research paper, we have investigated and analyzed alarming details of violence against women in Pakistan. In the paper, findings show that men are also killed for ‘honor,’ but the number is much lower than women. The ‘honor’ of families, communities and tribes transcends religion, culture, state laws and human mercy. The paper suggests that the killings of innocent women and girls for ‘dishonoring’ their families are happening every year despite so many laws and acts passed by the Government of Pakistan. Gender-based violence or violence against women is pervasive in all the provinces of Pakistan. COVID-19 has further escalated the issue, which may be recognized as a mass crime. Based on our moral, political research agenda that speaks for the gender justice and protection of women's rights in Pakistan, in this paper, we argue that the state must ensure gender justice through efficient judicial order and social justice programs. In our moral, political research agenda to support gender equality, we argue that the state law and judicial system has a multidimensional task to ensure a wider social justice agenda in Pakistani society. For instance, *Jirga* law is only one aspect of tribal and feudal society that indicates the dismal social justice system and the structure of patriarchy in which women experience violence. The patriarchal social structure that discriminates against women needs to be challenged. The patriarchal gendered cultural attitudes and justifications continue to legitimize the notion of ‘honor’ and perpetrate violence against women. The moral, political research agenda put forward in this paper supports the cause of gender social justice and calls for the rejection of patriarchal cultural values and practices through mass education, critical liberal, democratic socialization and thinking, gender and social justice community-based advocacy interventions, economic opportunity and freedom and autonomy of women. Simultaneously, the disempowering forces against women that operate in formal and informal institutions at the meso level must be addressed.

Finally, we understand that the gender mainstreaming approach is needed to effectively implement the policies and programs to improve the socio-economic status of women and girls, especially the implementation of education sector reforms and girls' education in the rural villages and towns. A mass-based gender-sensitive advocacy strategy should be designed and implemented to articulate the voice of women. Both at policy and implementation levels, particular focus should be paid to address the gender discriminatory practices against women stemming from cultural and customary procedures. This mass-based gender sensitive advocacy and awareness campaign should involve all the stakeholders of the society, i.e., students, teachers, health professionals, law enforcement officials, community leaders, lawyers, and media and civil society to play their role to protect and safeguard the fundamental rights of women for the democratic governance of society.

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