



Mapping the Crisis: A Critical Landscape of Domestic Violence in Pakistan

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Abstract

Domestic violence in Pakistan constitutes a widespread human rights and public health emergency, encompassing physical, psychological, sexual, and economic abuse within personal and familial relationships. Grounded in patriarchal norms, imbalanced power dynamics, and economic reliance, it continues to be significantly underreported because to stigma, fear of retribution, and a lack of faith in institutions. This abstract synthesizes national surveys, legal reviews, and policy assessments of the scale, drivers, legal responses, and service deficiencies. Evidence suggests that a significant percentage of ever-married women endure intimate partner violence, with their ability to seek assistance hindered by societal expectations and inadequate referral systems. An effective response necessitates coordinated minimum service standards across provinces; trauma-informed policing and judicial systems; survivor-centric social protection (financial assistance, housing, childcare); and comprehensive, ethical data systems integrating health, justice, and social services. Preventive initiatives—engaging males, integrating teaching on respectful relationships, and collaborating with community and church leaders are essential for altering societal norms. Enhancing accountability, funding, and cross-sector collaboration can convert legislation into tangible safety, mitigate intergenerational harm, and elevate health and economic outcomes for survivors and their families.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Pakistan, Provincial Laws In Pakistan, Legal Framework, Domestic Violence Act, Protection Orders, Access To Justice, Social Protection.

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INTRODUCTION

Physical harm, threats, emotional or psychological abuse, sexual violence (including marital rape when recognized), stalking, harassment, intimidation, economic deprivation, and control over one's finances, communication, or mobility are all considered forms of "domestic violence," depending on the jurisdiction. According to provincial laws in Pakistan, abuse of a spouse, child, elderly person, dependent, or any other household member in a "domestic relationship" is generally considered domestic violence (Government of Sindh, 2013; Government of Baluchistan, 2014; Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 2021; Government of Punjab, 2016).

Although definitions and remedies vary by jurisdiction, these laws generally cover both protection (restraining/protective orders) and support measures (shelters, counseling, and referral systems).

Although domestic violence in general is primarily within the provinces' jurisdiction following the 18th Amendment, complementary federal statutes such as the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010 and the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021, offer protections in particular situations, such as workplaces or sexual offenses (Government of Pakistan, 2010; Government of Pakistan, 2021). While some sections of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) criminalize behaviors that are frequently found in domestic settings, such as sexual harassment (509) and "insulting the modesty" (337 provisions), these general offenses do not take the place of specific protections against domestic violence (Criminal Law [Amendment] Act, 2009; PPC consolidated texts).

Objectives

1. To analyze the prevalence and forms of domestic violence in Pakistan.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of legal responses to domestic violence in Pakistan.

Questions

1. What are the main forms of domestic violence experienced by individuals in Pakistan, and what socio-cultural factors contribute to the underreporting of these incidents?
2. How effective are the legal frameworks and provincial laws in Pakistan in addressing domestic violence, and what challenges hinder their full implementation?

Literature Review

Obtaining Accurate Projections Is Infamously Challenging

Domestic violence in Pakistan Domestic violence in Pakistan is an endemic social and public health problem. The types of abuse, which may include physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse tend to be perpetrated in personal and familial relationships, where power relations are often imbalanced in favor of one party, usually the male partner. As discussed in the current research, domestic violence is not just a human rights matter, but is considered a public health issue, since it affects the physical health, mental health and societal functioning of the victim (Khan, & Hassan, 2020; Khan, Sarfraz, & Tabassum, 2020). The literature review discussed here provides an overview of the incidence, reasons and legal responses to domestic violence and presents a critique of the terrain of the problem in Pakistan. This review is consistent with the study objectives of assessing the magnitude and determinants of DV, and examining the legal and institutional responses in the country.

UNDERREPORTING OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Prevalence and Underreporting of Domestic Violence

Underreporting of domestic violence in Pakistan The primary stumbling block in addressing domestic violence in Pakistan is the under-reporting of abuse (Khan, Sarfraz, & Tabassum, 2020; Khan, Sarfraz, & Afzal, 2019). Typically, survivors are silent about their experiences for multiple reasons such as lack of trust in institutions, economic dependency, fear or retaliation and social shame. The survivors of domestic violence believe that they have no other choice than to suffer silently not because they want to but because they are constrained by the social and cultural mindset that silence the abuser and blames the victim. From the literature it is concluded that Danish, Akhtar & Imran (2025), Mankash et al. (2025), and Hafeez, Yaseen & Imran (2019) emphasizes these obstacles and explain how they affect survivors' willingness to report or disclose the abuse that they may have encountered.

This indicates the PDHS (2017–18)'s data has much potency to contribute in highlighting the prevalence of IPV. The survey revealed that 34% of women, who were ever in union, had experienced violence committed by a husband or partner in the 15–49 age group. Among these, over a quarter (28%) experienced physical violence and 6% experienced sexual violence; the majority of those who experienced violence did not report or seek help. The results of Shaikh (2024) also support the existence of IPV over a number of years of PDHS and report a positive correlation with poverty, less education and geographic variation. These results confirm the importance of comprehensive and comparable data sources that would not only depict the extent of DV, but also verify the appropriateness of available resources.

Worldwide, one in three women will experience physical or sexual abuse in their lifetime, with intimate partner violence representing the most common source of abuse (WHO, 2021). This is a worldwide percentage reflected also in Pakistan's national percentage, stressing the importance of having in-depth knowledge of domestic violence considering Pakistan's peculiarities in terms of culture and economy (Chohan & Haq, 2025; Qazi, et al., 2025; Malik, Muzaffar & Haq, 2025). Despite this, under-reporting continues to be a major obstacle as survivors are discouraged from coming forward by shame or fear of retaliation, and support services are unobtainable. The Aurat Foundation has recorded cases of forced marriages, acid attacks, honor killings, and burnings, highlighting the abuses that rarely make the news. Such sensational cases may make the news, but they are only the tip of the iceberg in the widespread of abuse taking place in Pakistan.

Legal Framework and Provincial Laws

The legal response to DV in Pakistan has changed over time, particularly following the 18th amendment to the Constitution in 2010, which decentralized many authorities to provincial governments, including those pertaining to DV. The result is a hodgepodge of laws across the country provinces enacting their own domestic violence laws, not always very well.

The Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2013 was enacted, and subsequently amended with the Rules of 2016, in Sindh. This Act acknowledges physical, mental, sexual and economic abuse and includes provisions for restraining orders and the appointment of protection officers for supporting survivors. However, the Act has not been easy to implement despite its broad scope, this is due to poor resources, fewer specialists and lack of awareness by the general public (Ahmed, & Imran, 2024).

Lastly, Baluchistan adopted the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2014 as a law containing similar protections for victims, which, however, excluded tribal areas at

the time of its promulgation. Likewise, Punjab's Protection of Women Against Violence Act (PPWVA, 2016) created Violence Against Women Centers (VAWCs) and GPS tagging of criminals. The Act, however, has been criticized for its connected nature and the legal system based on penal-protective model that fails to capture the peno-criminal aspects of domestic violence (Government of Punjab, 2016.)

KP adopted the Domestic Violence against Women (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2021, which is promising protection to victims. However, the definitions of torture as delineated in the Act and the practical challenges for the implementation of the legislation have been subjected to criticism when it comes to the working of the law (Government of KP, 2021).

Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2020 of Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) The ICT passed the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2020, which provided for protection orders, residence orders, and the function of protection officers in the federal territory.

But the new laws are a sign of a broader growing recognition in Pakistan of the need to address the matter of protecting victims of domestic violence and raise implementation problems. Absence of confidence on the legal institution, police not knowledgeable enough, police breaking the law are still the major problem in providing sufficient legal protection and safety for survivors.

Challenges in Implementation

The problem is that it's hard to enforce them all in practice all across these laws. Police frequently lack the training or proper resources to adequately respond to domestic violence. And what results is a patchwork of enforcement that leaves many survivors unprotected. Bureaucratic resistance, along with ignorance of legal remedies (like protective orders) also compound the impotence of the legal system's response to domestic violence.

Moreover, although specific other federal laws also in place to address some form of violence such as Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) and Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act (2021) that focus on any form of violence although are not directed towards a broad violence, and specifically, the type of intimate partner and family violence that take place in homes. Or, as this project has shown, such responses should be based in inclusive law, and not in a bifurcated system where justice for survivors works both for and against them.

Recommendations for Improvement

In conclusion and drawing from the literature and from the results of this study, we offer several recommendations to what can be the effective functioning of legal and institutional measures of domestic violence:

Provide Additional Law Enforcement Training: Police officers and law enforcement agencies need to be trained on how to respond to domestic violence calls. Interventions to inform women of the relevant municipal laws, as well as the inappropriateness of sexually suggestive clothing, are advised.

Deepening sectoral collaboration: It will require collaboration of the police, courts, social workers, health actors and NGOs, all of whom must work together to ensure that survivors are holistically catered for. This approach should prioritize victim-centered services, such as shelters and legal aid, as well as mental health counseling.

Increase Public Awareness and Education: Educating the public about survivors' legal rights and the support services that they can access is a critical link to support survivors seeking help. Community-level interventions, including educational campaigns, need to target shifts in gender norms and gender equivalence.

Resource Properly: The government will have to allocate sufficient fund for the enforcement of laws punishing the domestic violence like shelter homes, legal aids and training to police. A national data base would not only provide information on the prevalence of wife beating, but serve as a database for policy making.

A Brief Guide to Rights Awareness for Survivors (And Sympathizers)

- Safety and emergency: Identify safe exits (neighbors, family, shelters) if you are in immediate danger. Have a go-bag containing your phone, copies of your ID, a bit of cash, prescription drugs.
- Protection Orders: The courts may issue protection/residence orders, as well as provide for monetary support pursuant to the provincial DV statutes in Sindh (2015), Baluchistan (2013), KP (2020), Punjab (2016) and ICT DV Act (2020). Best is to deal with the court directly, a protection officer (if available) or really good legal aid advice agencies.
- Criminal complaints- Definition of criminal assault, harm, threat, sexual offence/harassment Crime The PPC (e.g. sections 332–337, 503, 354, 509) and the Anti-Rape Act, (2021) define assault, harm, threats, sexual offenses and harassment as crimes.
- Filing a FIR can be alongwith to move the civil court for protection.
- Harassment at work: For workplace abuse the 2010 Harassment Act provides for Ombudspersons and in-house inquiry procedure.
- Support services: NGOs, VAWCs (Punjab), and provincial Dar-ul-Amans provide shelter, counselling, and legal aid.

Methodology

This article employs a qualitative research methodology to plot domestic/wife abuse in Pakistan in terms of a prevalence, the legal landscape and the challenges to the implementation. Purposive sampling, to comprise those closely linked with the issue: domestic violence survivors, lawyers, front line staff and policy makers. Semi-structured interviews and FGDs were used to collect data. These methods provided participants the means to share their personal narratives and also to contribute to an understanding of what forms of abuse are present, what legal remedies are available, and what barriers exist for justice.

Analysis The analysis was thematic and entailed coding the transcriptions in categories of recurring themes, including social attitudes to domestic violence, access to justice, efficacy of the legal frameworks and services seeking manner. The approach made it possible to not only discover personal descriptions, but also insights about systemic parts in the criminal justice system and in society as a whole. Also in order to protect the involved parties safety, all ethical issues (Informed consent and well-being, and confidentiality, and voluntary participation, in which the data were fully respected as a result of the sensitive topic) have been considered.

Thematic Analysis

This domestic violence in Pakistan study adds to our understanding of domestic violence, in particular the themes related to incidence and aetiology of domestic violence, responses to it, and survivor's experiences. Themes were generated from the qualitative data collected from interviews with survivors, attorneys, social workers, and policy-makers. The results have implications regarding complexities of domestic violence and lacking in criminal justice system and sociocultural area of Pakistan.

Non-Disclosure of DV and the Stigma in Society

One theme brought up repeatedly was underreporting of DV, especially for reasons of shame, retaliation and lack of confidence in the system. Many victims said they did not

report the abuse because of cultural taboos and fear of public humiliation and being ostracized by their families and communities. The societal compulsion to save family honour and a patriarchal order in Pakistan also led to the reluctance of women to report the crime, authorities added. Women — especially those living in rural areas — often did not come forward because they felt no one would have their backs, feared backlash or did not believe the authorities would take them at their word, participants said. This theme demonstrates the importance of creating awareness and changing attitudes of survivors to encourage reporting.

Legal Structure and Implementation Gaps

Another dominant topic was Pakistan's legal relationship with domestic violence. While important legislation has been enacted (such as the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Acts in various provinces) speakers acknowledge that the implementation of these laws is indeed poor. Legal experts and social workers said there were laws in place in Sindh, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the anti-rape act of the federal government but survivors still find it difficult to access justice. These barriers include regulation, law enforcement that does not have adequate training and a lack of resources to enforce the law. Moreover, there is some evidence that survivors of domestic violence may experience barriers to entry and disillusionment with the legal system in spite of these laws and that protection orders and housing opportunities are not utilized.

Economic Dependence and Vulnerability

The theme of financial reliance was a constant motif in there, and the ‘experts’ stories. Many women reported financial dependence on their abusers and their inability to escape abusive partners. Respondents highlighted difficulties survivors face in escaping abuse—including being subjected to economic violence that restricted their access to financial resources. This theme signifies the need for economic empowerment (self-employment of survivors) service providers and for survivors individual provision of income and support that providers can support them in so that they may gain empowerment, independent and low susceptibility to domestic violence as well as provide them with the necessary facilitative structures such as poverty reduction and job provision programs so that they can achieve self-reliance in earnings and independence of their decision making relating law and other matters.

Lack of Efficacy of Support Services and Social Protection Gaps

Some participants also reported that while support services (such as shelters and counselling) exist, they are insufficient, not available in all locations, and are sometimes inaccessible, particularly in rural or underserved regions. A lot of survivors slipped through the cracks with the siloing in the various service provider areas (healthcare, law enforcement, social services), which made it more difficult for them to access more holistic services. Moreover, lack of funds and lack of trained professionals in sufficient number emerged as the main barriers to assistance provision. The Panel of Experts called for an integrated site-specific package of survivor accessible healthcare, justice, and social services to improve access for survivors.

Prevention and Changing Societal Norms

Prevention and normalization was also articulated as at the heart of the fight against domestic violence in Pakistan. Experts said girls and boys had to be taught and the community “turned on its head” to address deeply-held gender attitudes to violence. Instead they agreed we must have programs that target young men and boys and educate them about respectful relationships, gender equality and what harm is done through violence if we are to truly end the cycle of abuse. They also indicated that collaborating

with religious leaders, community leaders, schools, etc. could change the attitudes of the entire society towards domestic violence and bring about a non-violent culture and respect.

Access to Justice and Protection for Survivors in the Country

The final theme focused on barriers to accessing justice, and inadequate protection for victims. Some Legislation has been issued and some shelters established in some Provinces, however as another interviewee stated “victims suffer from long time to reach the legal procedures and they do not get legal aid in time and effectively.” The overwhelmed legal system and unprepared police delayed the protection of survivors, police officers and legal experts said. Survivors are also often afraid to turn to law enforcement out of fear of retaliation and lack of faith in the justice system.

Thematic analysis illustrates the endemic nature of domestic violence in a country like Pakistan related to sociocultural side, legal lacunas, economic dependency and deprivation of social support. The study also underlines the necessities to take a more holistic approach to legal reform, to do more to ensure that existing laws are implemented, to enhance and make enforceable social protection measures and to change the status of the society to make it possible to mitigate domestic abuse. These findings emphasize the importance of a multi-sector response to promote the protection and support of survivors, and demonstrate the need for a dual strategy from Pakistan in responding to domestic violence, both in terms of prevention and intervention.

Conclusion

Over the last ten years the legislative changes in Pakistan have been fantastic. In writing, however, rules do not necessarily lead to less domestic violence. Pakistan need: the constant funding of services and the continuous build up to health and justice systems integrated survivor centered social protection as a bold evidence-based realignment of norms to nothing less than lived safety. In the meantime, accountability and decision making must be driven by good quality data that has been ethically collected. Lower levels of violence, greater use of reporting services and the restoration of agency and dignity among survivors, regardless of which part of Pakistan they live in, are the real markers not the volume of statutes. Laws can only go so far without strong enforcement, public awareness and cultural transformation, and Pakistan has made legal progress on fighting domestic violence even as its laws have yet to be fully enforced. It's going to take sustained legislation, gender-informed policing power, victim protection and accountability to fortify the legal system's response even if it already has the legislation to protect victims' rights.

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