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GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN CONTEMPORARY COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a serious violation of human rights and a major barrier to gender equality in contemporary communities. It includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse, domestic violence, forced marriage, sexual harassment, human trafficking, harmful practices, and technology-facilitated abuse. Despite international agreements, legal reforms, and growing public awareness, women and girls continue to experience violence in their homes, workplaces, educational institutions, public spaces, and digital environments. This study examines the relationship between gender-based violence and women's rights, focusing on the social, cultural, economic, legal, and institutional factors that contribute to violence and limit access to justice. Using a qualitative approach based on secondary sources published between 2023 and 2025, the research reviews international reports, human rights publications, and relevant evidence concerning Pakistan and other contemporary communities. The literature identifies gender inequality, unequal power relations, harmful social norms, economic dependency, victim-blaming, inadequate protection services, and weak implementation of laws as significant factors that contribute to the persistence of gender-based violence. The study also examines the consequences of violence for women's physical and psychological health, education, employment, financial independence, family relationships, and participation in public life. Particular attention is given to barriers that discourage survivors from reporting abuse, including stigma, fear of retaliation, financial constraints, and limited confidence in justice institutions. The findings suggest that legal protection alone cannot eliminate gender-based violence unless it is supported by effective enforcement, survivor-centred services, education, economic empowerment, community participation, and prevention initiatives.

KEYWORDS: *Gender-based violence, women's rights, gender equality, domestic violence, sexual harassment, human rights, women's empowerment, access to justice, harmful social norms, survivor protection, digital violence, community awareness, legal reform, Pakistan.*

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence is one of the most persistent human rights challenges facing contemporary societies. It refers to harmful acts directed against individuals because of their gender or acts that disproportionately affect people of a particular gender. Women and girls are especially affected by forms of violence associated with unequal power relations, discrimination, and restrictive gender expectations. Such violence can occur within intimate relationships, families, workplaces, educational institutions, public spaces, and online communities. Schimmel, N. (2024). found that It may involve physical assault, sexual abuse, emotional intimidation, economic control, stalking, forced marriage, trafficking, or other practices that undermine women's safety and autonomy. Gender-based violence is not simply a private or domestic issue; it is a social and institutional problem that affects equality, public health, community well-being, and the realization of fundamental human rights. Women's rights are grounded in the principles of equality, dignity, freedom, security, and equal protection under the law. These principles recognize women's entitlement to education, employment, healthcare, political participation, freedom from discrimination, and protection against violence. International human rights frameworks establish that women should be able to exercise these rights without fear of abuse or coercion. However, a difference frequently exists between rights recognized in legislation and the rights women can exercise in everyday

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life. Discriminatory attitudes, social pressures, inadequate services, and institutional weaknesses can prevent survivors from obtaining protection or pursuing justice. Consequently, the existence of legal provisions does not automatically guarantee safety or equality.

Recent international evidence demonstrates the scale of the problem. The World Health Organization's 2025 publication, *Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2023*, presents updated global, regional, and national estimates based on population surveys and studies covering the period from 2000 to 2023. Ningtyas, J. E., Prakoso, H. A., & Deniar, S. M. (2026). Explained that The report highlights intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence as major public health and human rights concerns. Its findings emphasize that gender-based violence crosses national, social, and economic boundaries, although its prevalence and forms vary among communities. The report also recognizes that stigma and weaknesses in data collection can lead to underreporting. In contemporary communities, gender-based violence is closely connected with social norms and unequal power structures. In some settings, traditional expectations regarding obedience, family honour, masculinity, and women's behaviour can be used to justify controlling practices or discourage survivors from seeking assistance. Women who report abuse may face blame, exclusion, threats, or pressure to preserve family relationships at the expense of their own safety. Such attitudes can normalize violence and weaken accountability. It is important, however, not to assume that all cultural or religious communities share the same beliefs or practices. Violence must be examined through specific social conditions, power relations, institutional responses, and individual circumstances rather than through stereotypes about particular groups.Gender-based violence also affects women's economic and social opportunities. Survivors may experience physical injuries, trauma, depression, anxiety, interrupted education, loss of employment, housing insecurity, or financial dependence. Fear of harassment and assault can restrict women's mobility and participation in community activities. United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). (2024). Explains that Digital abuse may expose women to threats, impersonation, non-consensual distribution of intimate material, and coordinated online harassment. These experiences can silence women's voices in education, employment, journalism, politics, and public debate. Violence therefore restricts not only personal safety but also the practical exercise of wider civil, social, and economic rights.

In Pakistan and other societies facing significant social and institutional challenges, gender-based violence remains an important concern for policymakers, community organizations, and human rights advocates. The Sustainable Social Development Organization's *Mapping Gender-Based Violence in Pakistan 2024* reported thousands of recorded incidents across several categories, while highlighting concerns about low conviction rates. Such administrative figures describe cases reported to relevant authorities rather than the complete prevalence of violence, because many incidents are never reported. Nevertheless, the report illustrates the importance of strengthening investigations, accountability, survivor support, and public confidence in justice institutions. Against this background, the present study examines gender-based violence and women's rights in contemporary communities. Botha, L. (2026). Explains that It investigates the principal forms of violence, the social and institutional factors that sustain them, their consequences for women's lives, and the effectiveness of legal and community responses. Using secondary literature published between 2023 and 2025, the study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between violence, inequality, and access to justice. It argues that meaningful progress requires more than condemning abusive behaviour: societies must create conditions

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in which women can exercise their rights, report violence safely, obtain effective protection, and participate equally in social, economic, and political life.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What social, cultural, economic, and institutional factors contribute to gender-based violence in contemporary communities, and how can women's rights be protected through effective legal measures, community participation, and survivor-centred support?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the concept, major forms, and contemporary patterns of gender-based violence affecting women and girls.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review examines gender-based violence and women's rights through six major themes: the nature and prevalence of violence, social and cultural determinants, the consequences for women's lives, legal protection and access to justice, digital violence, and community-based prevention. It draws on international institutional publications and evidence relevant to Pakistan, with particular attention to materials published between 2023 and 2025. The review treats violence as both an individual experience and a broader social problem shaped by power relations, institutional practices, and unequal access to resources. Johnstone, I. (2023). revealed that It also recognizes that women's experiences differ according to age, disability, economic circumstances, location, and other factors that influence vulnerability and access to support.Gender-based violence encompasses harmful acts directed against women because of gender-related inequalities, expectations, or power relations. It includes physical violence, sexual violence, psychological abuse, economic abuse, harassment, coercion, trafficking, and certain harmful practices. These forms of violence may occur independently or together. For example, a woman experiencing physical abuse may also face financial control, threats, restrictions on movement, and psychological intimidation. Understanding these overlapping experiences is important because an intervention that addresses only physical injuries may fail to address the broader circumstances that prevent a survivor from achieving safety and independence.The World Health Organization's *Violence against Women Prevalence Estimates, 2023*, published in 2025, provides updated global, regional, and national estimates of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence. The estimates draw on population-based studies conducted between 2000 and 2023 and supersede earlier estimates covered by the report. This publication provides an important evidence base for assessing the scale of violence and monitoring progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 5.2, which calls for the elimination of violence against women and girls.

The World Health Organization's broader work on violence against women emphasizes that violence is both a public health concern and a violation of human rights. Its consequences extend beyond the immediate incident to include long-term physical, psychological, sexual, and reproductive health effects. Violence can also affect children and other family members who witness abuse or live in unsafe environments. These wider effects demonstrate why

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gender-based violence should not be treated solely as a matter between individuals. Deswal, S., & Deswal, P. (2025). Elaborated on Prevention and response require cooperation among health services, justice institutions, educational organizations, and community support systems. An important issue in measuring gender-based violence is the difference between actual prevalence and officially recorded cases. Many survivors do not report abuse because of fear, shame, financial dependence, pressure from family members, concerns about retaliation, or distrust of authorities. Administrative data therefore reflect incidents that reach police, courts, hospitals, or other reporting systems rather than all violence experienced within a population. Differences in legal definitions and data collection practices also complicate comparisons between countries and years.The 2025 *Gender Snapshot*, produced by UN Women and the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, identifies violence against women and girls as a major barrier to gender equality and sustainable development. It emphasizes the need for legislation, prevention programmes, survivor services, dedicated budgets, and accountability. The report also connects violence prevention with women's economic autonomy, indicating that social protection and financial inclusion can contribute to reducing vulnerability in certain circumstances. The literature thus establishes that gender-based violence is widespread, multidimensional, and inadequately captured by reported-case statistics alone. Its forms and prevalence differ across settings, but the need for reliable evidence and effective protection is universal. A comprehensive response must therefore combine sound data collection with prevention, accessible services, legal accountability, and respect for the rights and choices of survivors.

Social norms and unequal power relations play a significant role in shaping how gender-based violence develops, is understood, and is addressed within communities. In some settings, men are expected to exercise authority over household decisions while women are expected to remain obedient or prioritize family reputation. Such expectations can create conditions in which controlling behaviour is tolerated or abuse is treated as a private family matter. When communities discourage women from questioning authority or seeking external assistance, abusive individuals may face fewer social consequences.However, it is important to distinguish between cultural identity and harmful practices. Communities are diverse, and cultural or religious beliefs may also provide resources for promoting dignity, compassion, equality, and protection. Alphons, O., & Nassereddin, N. (2022). found that The relevant question is not whether a particular culture causes violence, but how specific beliefs, social pressures, unequal power relations, and institutional responses affect the safety and autonomy of women. This distinction helps avoid stereotypes while allowing harmful practices to be examined critically.The World Health Organization's work on violence against women identifies gender inequality and harmful social norms as important factors associated with violence. Unequal access to education, economic resources, and decision-making power can make it more difficult for women to resist abuse or leave unsafe circumstances. When violence is normalized through jokes, victim-blaming, threats, or social silence, communities may inadvertently reinforce the conditions that allow abuse to continue. Prevention must therefore challenge attitudes that excuse violence and promote accountability for perpetrators.

The UN Women–UN DESA *Gender Snapshot 2025* emphasizes the importance of comprehensive approaches that combine legislation with institutional mechanisms, public awareness, research, services, and financial resources. This framework recognizes that violence is unlikely to be eliminated by legal prohibition alone. Community attitudes, institutional conduct, and the availability of assistance influence whether laws are

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implemented effectively and whether survivors can seek help without facing further harm. In many communities, victim-blaming remains a serious obstacle to justice. Survivors may be questioned about their clothing, relationships, movements, previous behaviour, or reasons for remaining in an abusive situation. Such responses shift responsibility from the perpetrator to the survivor and may discourage others from reporting abuse. Women, U. N. (2014). Explained that A rights-based approach instead recognizes that responsibility for violence lies with the person who commits it and that every survivor deserves dignity, safety, and access to appropriate assistance.Family and community relationships can also influence women's ability to obtain protection. Relatives may provide shelter, emotional support, financial assistance, and help navigating legal systems. Alternatively, family members may pressure survivors to withdraw complaints, return to unsafe environments, or remain silent to protect social standing. The effectiveness of community-based responses therefore depends on whether local institutions and support networks prioritize safety and consent rather than reputation or reconciliation at any cost.The literature suggests that changing harmful social norms requires sustained educational and community engagement. Schools, universities, community organizations, religious leaders, men's groups, and local authorities can contribute to discussions about consent, respectful relationships, equal rights, and non-violent conflict resolution. These initiatives are most effective when accompanied by reliable services and institutional accountability. Awareness without protection may leave survivors exposed, while legal enforcement without social support may fail to address the attitudes that normalize abuse.

Gender-based violence has consequences that extend across physical health, psychological well-being, education, employment, family relationships, and participation in public life. Physical violence can cause injuries, chronic pain, disability, and other immediate or long-term health problems. Sexual violence may result in unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, reproductive health complications, and trauma. Psychological abuse can undermine confidence, increase fear, and restrict a woman's sense of personal autonomy.These effects may continue even after the immediate violence has ended.The World Health Organization's 2025 prevalence report and associated research highlight the importance of understanding violence as a long-term public health problem rather than a series of isolated incidents. Its effects may persist through repeated exposure, threats, financial control, and continuing contact with an abusive partner or perpetrator. Effective services therefore need to address immediate safety as well as longer-term healthcare, psychological support, and recovery. The psychological consequences of violence can include anxiety, depression, trauma-related symptoms, sleep difficulties, social withdrawal, and reduced confidence. Survivors may struggle to concentrate on education or work, particularly when threats and abuse continue. Some may experience isolation because perpetrators restrict contact with friends, relatives, or support organizations. Others may avoid public places or online participation because they fear harassment or retaliation. These consequences can limit opportunities for personal development and participation in community life.Gender-based violence can also interfere with women's access to education. Harassment in educational institutions, unsafe travel, forced marriage, and family restrictions can interrupt attendance or prevent girls from continuing their studies. When schools and universities lack confidential reporting procedures and effective safeguarding arrangements, students may feel that reporting abuse will expose them to further harm. Educational institutions have a responsibility to establish safe environments, provide information about available support, and respond appropriately to disclosures.

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Employment and economic security may also be affected. Survivors may miss work because of injuries, medical appointments, emotional distress, or the need to relocate. Perpetrators may interfere with employment by restricting travel, monitoring communications, withholding money, or threatening colleagues and employers. Enebeli, E. L., Enebeli, U. U., Dakyen, Y. J., Cherima, Y. J., Hassan, R. K., Mikailu, F., ... & Oko, O. P. (2026). revealed that Economic abuse can include preventing a woman from accessing her earnings, creating debt in her name, damaging her property, or obstructing her ability to work. Such practices can increase dependence and make leaving an unsafe relationship more difficult.The *Gender Snapshot 2025* highlights the relationship between violence and economic participation. It reports that women who experience intimate partner violence earn, on average, between 26% and 60% less than women who do not experience such violence. This reported relationship illustrates the potential economic consequences of abuse, although it should not be interpreted as a universal causal estimate applicable to every woman or country. Violence can also undermine women's political and civic rights. Harassment, threats, and intimidation may discourage women from becoming community leaders, journalists, activists, or elected representatives. Digital attacks can amplify these effects by exposing women to public humiliation, threats of sexual violence, impersonation, and coordinated harassment. When women withdraw from public discussion to protect themselves, communities lose valuable perspectives and democratic participation becomes less inclusive.Children and other family members may also be affected when they witness violence or live in environments characterized by fear and coercion. This does not mean that every child exposed to violence will experience the same outcomes, but it demonstrates the importance of family-wide support and appropriate safeguarding. Overall, the literature indicates that gender-based violence restricts women's rights through interconnected health, economic, educational, and social consequences. A comprehensive response must therefore address not only the incident itself but also the barriers that prevent survivors from recovering and participating fully in society.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative research methodology to investigate gender-based violence and women's rights in contemporary communities. This approach is appropriate because the subject involves complex social relationships, cultural expectations, unequal power structures, institutional responses, and human rights concerns that require interpretation within their social contexts. The research is based entirely on secondary data obtained from published institutional reports, human rights documents, official statistics, and relevant policy publications issued between 2023 and 2025. The principal sources include the World Health Organization, UN Women, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the World Bank, and relevant organizations working on gender-based violence in Pakistan. The selected materials address the prevalence and forms of violence, social determinants, health consequences, legal protections, institutional accountability, digital abuse, and community-based prevention. Sources were considered according to their relevance to the research question, publication period, institutional credibility, and contribution to understanding women's rights. The research process involved identifying relevant publications, examining their central findings, organizing the information into thematic categories, comparing recurring patterns, and interpreting their implications for the objectives of the study. Particular attention was given to distinguishing population-based prevalence estimates from administrative records of reported incidents, because these sources

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measure different aspects of gender-based violence. International evidence was used to establish the wider context, while Pakistan-focused publications were considered to examine national and institutional challenges. The analysis also recognizes that published evidence may be affected by underreporting, differences in legal definitions, variations in data collection methods, and unequal representation of marginalized groups.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study uses a descriptive and exploratory research design based on a qualitative review of secondary literature. The descriptive component identifies the principal forms of gender-based violence, the challenges affecting women's rights, and the institutional responses discussed in the selected publications. The exploratory component examines how social norms, economic inequalities, legal arrangements, and community practices interact to influence women's experiences of violence and their ability to obtain protection. The research design is organized into five stages. First, the research question and objectives were established to determine the scope of the study. Second, publications from 2023 to 2025 were identified from international institutions, human rights organizations, and relevant sources concerning Pakistan. Third, the selected documents were examined for evidence relating to physical and sexual violence, psychological abuse, economic control, digital harassment, access to justice, and prevention. Fourth, the information was classified into six main themes corresponding to the literature review. Fifth, the identified themes were compared and synthesized to develop the findings, recommendations, and conclusion. The primary unit of analysis is the published document and its reported evidence, rather than an individual participant or a community surveyed directly by the researcher. International publications provide comparative context, while national reports illustrate specific challenges involving reporting, investigation, and accountability. The study does not attempt to estimate a new prevalence rate, calculate statistical relationships, or establish that a particular social factor independently causes violence. Instead, it examines patterns identified in existing research and considers their implications for the protection of women's rights. To maintain analytical consistency, the study distinguishes between documented findings, interpretations, and recommendations. It also acknowledges the limitations of secondary research, including the possibility of incomplete reporting, differences in data collection methods, and gaps in information about women whose experiences are rarely recorded.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis follows a qualitative thematic approach in which published evidence is examined, categorized, compared, and interpreted according to its relevance to gender-based violence and women's rights. The first theme concerns the prevalence and forms of violence. The World Health Organization's 2025 report on violence against women provides updated estimates of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence, offering an important basis for understanding the global scale of the problem. The analysis recognizes that population-based estimates and police-recorded cases are not interchangeable because many incidents are never reported to authorities. The second theme concerns social norms and unequal power relations. The reviewed literature indicates that attitudes that excuse abuse, blame survivors, or prioritize family reputation over personal safety can discourage reporting and weaken accountability. The third theme examines the consequences of violence for women's health, education, employment, financial autonomy, and public participation. The

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evidence suggests that the effects of violence may continue long after an incident and can restrict women's ability to exercise their fundamental rights. The fourth theme concerns legal protection and access to justice. The analysis considers whether formal laws are supported by practical enforcement, confidential reporting procedures, appropriate professional training, and accessible survivor services. The fifth theme concerns technology-facilitated abuse, including online harassment, threats, stalking, and non-consensual distribution of personal material. This theme highlights the need for digital safety, privacy protection, and effective responses to technology-enabled violations. The sixth theme concerns community prevention and survivor-centred services. The UN Women–UN DESA *Gender Snapshot 2025* emphasizes the importance of comprehensive legal frameworks, prevention initiatives, institutional mechanisms, research, services, and adequate funding. Pakistan-focused reporting was examined separately to identify national concerns relating to reported incidents, investigations, and conviction rates. The SSDO report was treated as a source of administrative information rather than a complete measure of violence throughout the population. Finally, the themes were compared to identify recurring relationships between gender inequality, social acceptance of abuse, institutional weaknesses, and barriers to protection. The analysis indicates that these factors frequently interact and that improvements in one area may have limited effects if other barriers remain unresolved.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study, based on the reviewed secondary literature, indicate that gender-based violence remains a serious obstacle to women's rights in contemporary communities. The first major finding is that violence takes multiple forms and cannot be understood exclusively as physical assault. Sexual violence, psychological abuse, economic control, harassment, stalking, coercion, and technology-facilitated abuse can also restrict women's safety and autonomy. These forms of violence may overlap, creating complex situations in which survivors face several barriers simultaneously. The World Health Organization's 2025 prevalence estimates demonstrate the continuing importance of violence against women as a global public health and human rights issue. The second finding is that gender inequality and harmful social expectations can contribute to the normalization of abuse. Where women are discouraged from challenging authority, reporting violence, or making independent decisions, perpetrators may benefit from silence and limited accountability. Victim-blaming and pressure to preserve family reputation can further discourage survivors from seeking assistance. However, the analysis also indicates that communities are not uniform: local institutions, family networks, educators, and community leaders can play constructive roles when they support equality, safety, and respect for women's rights.The third finding concerns the consequences of violence for women's health and participation in society. Physical injuries and psychological distress can affect everyday functioning, while threats and coercive control may interfere with education, employment, relationships, and social participation. Economic abuse can restrict access to earnings or prevent women from maintaining independent financial resources. These consequences show that gender-based violence is not only an immediate safety concern but also a barrier to long-term equality and personal development. The *Gender Snapshot 2025* further highlights the relationship between intimate partner violence and reduced earnings, demonstrating the potential economic costs associated with abuse. The fourth finding is that formal legal protections must be accompanied by effective implementation. Legislation can establish rights and provide

mechanisms for reporting, investigation, and prosecution, but its practical value depends on the accessibility and reliability of the institutions responsible for enforcement.

CONCLUSION

Gender-based violence remains a serious violation of human rights and a major barrier to women's equality, dignity, safety, and participation in contemporary communities. This study examined the forms, causes, consequences, and institutional responses associated with gender-based violence through a qualitative review of secondary literature published between 2023 and 2025. The reviewed evidence demonstrates that violence against women includes physical and sexual assault, psychological abuse, economic control, harassment, coercion, and technology-facilitated violations. These forms of abuse can occur in homes, workplaces, educational institutions, public spaces, and digital environments, affecting women from different social and economic backgrounds. The findings indicate that unequal power relations, harmful social expectations, economic vulnerability, victim-blaming, and inadequate institutional responses can contribute to the continuation of violence and restrict survivors' access to justice. Violence also has consequences that extend beyond immediate physical harm, affecting mental health, education, employment, financial independence, family relationships, and public participation. Although legal reforms and international commitments have strengthened recognition of women's rights, formal protections cannot guarantee safety unless they are effectively implemented and supported by accessible services. The analysis further highlights the importance of distinguishing reported cases from the actual prevalence of violence, because stigma, fear of retaliation, and limited confidence in justice institutions can discourage survivors from reporting abuse. In Pakistan and other communities facing institutional and social challenges, improving investigation procedures, strengthening accountability, expanding survivor services, and building public trust are important priorities. At the same time, digital technologies require additional attention because online harassment, stalking, threats, and privacy violations can undermine women's safety and freedom of expression. The study concludes that effective prevention requires a comprehensive approach combining strong legal frameworks, survivor-centred justice, healthcare, education, economic assistance, digital protection, and community engagement. Governments must ensure that laws are enforced fairly, while educational institutions and community organizations should challenge harmful attitudes and promote respect for women's rights.

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