Journal Of
Gender, Society And
Contemporary Studiesples
VOL 01 | No. 1 | 2026
P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN PAKISTAN: SOCIAL, CULTURAL, AND INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO JUSTICE

Kinza Ishaq
BS, Department of CS Computer Science, The Cosmic Degree College (For Women) ,University of Okara

ABSTRACT

Gender-based violence against women remains a serious social, cultural, legal, and human rights issue in Pakistan. Despite constitutional protections, legislative reforms, and growing public awareness, many women continue to experience domestic violence, sexual harassment, rape, forced marriage, honour-based violence, psychological abuse, economic exploitation, and other forms of gender-based discrimination. The problem is deeply connected with patriarchal social structures, unequal power relationships, traditional gender expectations, economic dependency, lack of education, and institutional weaknesses. Many victims face difficulties in reporting violence because of social stigma, fear of family rejection, financial insecurity, threats, and limited access to legal assistance. Furthermore, weaknesses in law enforcement, lengthy judicial procedures, inadequate investigation, corruption, and insufficient victim protection services create additional barriers to justice. This research examines gender-based violence against women in Pakistan by focusing on the social, cultural, and institutional factors that prevent victims from accessing justice. It explores the influence of patriarchal values, family pressure, social attitudes, economic inequality, police practices, judicial procedures, and the implementation of existing legislation. The study proposes a qualitative research approach supported by relevant secondary sources, including academic publications, legal documents, institutional reports, and human rights research published between 2023 and 2025. The research aims to understand why legal protections do not always translate into effective justice for women and to identify measures that can improve institutional accountability, legal awareness, victim support, and gender equality. It emphasizes that addressing gender-based violence requires coordinated efforts from government institutions, law enforcement agencies, judicial authorities, educational institutions, civil society organizations, and communities.

KEYWORDS:*Gender-Based Violence, Women, Pakistan, Social Barriers, Cultural Barriers, Institutional Barriers, Access to Justice, Patriarchy, Domestic Violence, Sexual Harassment, Women's Rights, Legal Protection, Gender Equality, Human Rights.*

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence against women is one of the most serious human rights and social justice challenges facing contemporary societies. It refers to harmful acts directed against individuals because of their gender, unequal power relationships, or socially constructed gender expectations. Women may experience different forms of violence, including physical abuse, sexual assault, psychological harassment, economic exploitation, forced marriage, domestic violence, honour-based violence, and online harassment. These acts affect women's physical and mental health, personal freedom, educational opportunities, economic independence, and participation in society. Although gender-based violence exists across different countries and communities, its nature and consequences are influenced by cultural traditions, social structures, economic conditions, and institutional responses. In Pakistan, the problem remains particularly important because traditional gender expectations, patriarchal attitudes, economic inequality, and weaknesses in the implementation of protective laws can prevent women from obtaining justice.Pakistan has introduced several constitutional and legislative measures intended to protect women's rights and promote gender equality. The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, while different legislative measures address domestic violence, workplace harassment, rape, forced marriage, and honour-based crimes. However, the existence of legal

Journal Of
Gender, Society And
Contemporary Studiesples
VOL 01 | No. 1 | 2026
P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

protections does not necessarily guarantee that women can access justice in practice. Many women experience difficulties when attempting to report violence, obtain medical assistance, access legal representation, or participate in judicial proceedings. In some cases, victims are pressured by family members or community representatives to remain silent, withdraw complaints, or accept informal settlements.

These circumstances demonstrate the difference between legal protection on paper and effective protection in everyday life. Pyae, K. K. (2024).foun d that.Social and cultural attitudes are important factors contributing to gender-based violence in Pakistan. Patriarchal social structures often give men greater authority in family decisions, financial matters, and community relationships. In certain environments, women are expected to demonstrate obedience, preserve family honour, and prioritize household responsibilities over personal independence. These expectations can create conditions in which violence is tolerated, hidden, or treated as a private family matter rather than a violation of individual rights. Women who challenge traditional expectations may experience criticism, intimidation, restrictions, or physical abuse. In particular, honour-related violence demonstrates how certain cultural beliefs can be misused to justify the control of women's behaviour, relationships, mobility, and personal decisions. United Nations Office on Drugs. (2024).found thatEconomic dependency further increases women's vulnerability to violence and limits their ability to seek justice. Women who lack independent income, employment opportunities, property ownership, or financial resources may find it difficult to leave abusive relationships or support legal proceedings. In rural and economically disadvantaged communities, limited educational opportunities and inadequate access to legal information can make these difficulties even more serious. Financial dependence may force victims to remain in unsafe domestic environments because they fear losing housing, family support, children's custody, or financial security. Therefore, gender-based violence should not be understood only as an individual act of aggression; it is also connected to broader economic and social inequalities that restrict women's choices.

Institutional barriers represent another major dimension of the problem. Police departments, healthcare facilities, courts, legal aid organizations, and government protection institutions play essential roles in responding to violence against women. However, victims may encounter insensitive treatment, delays in registering complaints, inadequate investigation, pressure to compromise, and limited access to confidential support services. Lengthy judicial proceedings and the financial cost of legal representation may discourage women from pursuing cases. In some situations, victims are questioned about their personal character, clothing, relationships, or conduct rather than receiving appropriate protection and support. Such practices can create further trauma and reduce confidence in the justice system. Effective justice therefore requires not only appropriate laws but also trained personnel, accountable institutions, accessible services, and respectful treatment of victims.The situation is also influenced by differences in education, geographical location, social class, and institutional resources. Women living in rural areas may experience greater difficulties accessing police stations, courts, shelters, healthcare facilities, and legal assistance. Women with disabilities, religious minorities, displaced women, and economically marginalized groups may face additional forms of discrimination. Similarly, women in urban areas may have greater access to support organizations but can still experience domestic violence, workplace harassment, online abuse, and difficulties in obtaining legal protection. These differences demonstrate that gender-based violence is a complex issue requiring responses that consider the different circumstances and needs of women.Addressing gender-based

Journal Of
Gender, Society And
Contemporary Studiesples
VOL 01 | No. 1 | 2026
P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

violence requires coordinated action from government authorities, law enforcement agencies, judicial institutions, educational organizations, civil society, and local communities. Legal reforms must be accompanied by effective implementation, public awareness, economic empowerment, victim protection, and accountability for perpetrators. Education can challenge harmful stereotypes, while accessible legal assistance and confidential reporting mechanisms can help victims pursue justice without fear of further victimization. This research therefore examines gender-based violence against women in Pakistan through three interconnected dimensions: social barriers, cultural barriers, and institutional barriers. It aims to understand why women continue to face difficulties in obtaining justice despite existing legal protections and to identify practical measures for improving women's safety, equality, and access to justice.

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What social, cultural, and institutional barriers prevent women in Pakistan from obtaining justice against gender-based violence?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the social, cultural, and institutional barriers that prevent women in Pakistan from accessing justice against gender-based violence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender-based violence is a broad social and human rights issue involving harmful acts committed against individuals because of their gender or unequal gender relations. It includes physical, sexual, psychological, and economic violence, as well as forced marriage, honour-based crimes, harassment, trafficking, and other forms of discrimination. Women experience gender-based violence in different environments, including homes, workplaces, educational institutions, public spaces, and online communities. Such violence can have serious consequences for women's physical health, psychological well-being, financial independence, social relationships, and participation in public life. It also affects families and communities by reinforcing inequality and limiting women's opportunities. In Pakistan, gender-based violence is closely connected with unequal power relationships, patriarchal attitudes, economic dependency, and social expectations concerning women's behaviour. The National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR, 2023), in its domestic violence policy brief, identifies domestic violence as a major human rights concern and emphasizes the need for stronger legal and social protection mechanisms. The report also discusses the importance of coordinated government action, public awareness, and improved legal responses. Understanding gender-based violence therefore requires examining not only individual incidents but also the social structures and institutional practices that allow violence to continue.Patriarchy is one of the important social factors associated with gender-based violence in Pakistan. Ibrahim, L. (2026). Explan that It refers to social arrangements in which men generally hold greater authority and decision-making power within families, communities, and institutions. In patriarchal environments, women may experience restrictions on their mobility, education, employment, property ownership, marriage decisions, and participation in public life. Such restrictions can increase women's vulnerability to different forms of abuse because they reduce their ability to make independent decisions or challenge unfair treatment. In some families, male authority is

Journal Of
Gender, Society And
Contemporary Studiesples
VOL 01 | No. 1 | 2026
P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

treated as a traditional responsibility, while women's independence is viewed as a challenge to established social expectations.

Its Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Strategy for 2024–2030 also identifies gender disparities within security and justice institutions as important challenges. These observations demonstrate that gender-based violence cannot be addressed only through punishment of individual offenders. It also requires changes in social attitudes, family relationships, institutional practices, and unequal power structures.Cultural beliefs and traditional expectations play an important role in shaping women's experiences of violence in Pakistan. Family honour, social reputation, obedience, and conformity to traditional gender roles can influence how women are treated within households and communities. In some circumstances, women's decisions regarding marriage, relationships, clothing, education, employment, and mobility may be controlled by family members. When women challenge these expectations, they may face intimidation, emotional abuse, physical violence, or restrictions on their freedom. Honour-based violence represents an especially serious form of gender-based abuse because it is sometimes justified through distorted interpretations of family reputation and cultural traditions. Practices involving forced marriage, exchange marriage, denial of inheritance, and restrictions on women's personal choices also reflect unequal social relationships. The National Report on the Status of Women in Pakistan by UN Women (2023) highlights the importance of addressing harmful social attitudes and improving access to justice for women and girls. The report discusses how weak implementation of laws, limited awareness, and inadequate gender-sensitive responses can prevent victims from obtaining effective protection. Cultural traditions should not be treated as justification for violence. Instead, social institutions and community leaders should promote interpretations of cultural values that respect women's dignity, freedom, and legal rights.Domestic violence is one of the most widespread and difficult forms of gender-based violence to address because it frequently occurs within private family environments. It may involve physical assault, threats, verbal abuse, psychological intimidation, sexual violence, economic control, and restrictions on personal freedom.

Women experiencing domestic violence may be reluctant to report their situations because of fear, financial dependency, pressure from relatives, concern for children, and uncertainty about their future. In some cases, families encourage women to tolerate abuse to preserve marriages or maintain social reputation. This pressure can prevent victims from accessing police services, medical assistance, shelters, and legal representation. The NCHR's 2023 Domestic Violence Policy Brief emphasizes the importance of comprehensive legal protection and improved institutional responses to domestic violence. It also highlights the need for awareness campaigns and cooperation among government institutions, civil society, and communities. Furthermore, the report recognizes that legal protections must be supported by practical services that enable women to report violence safely. Domestic violence should not be regarded as a private family disagreement. It is a violation of individual rights that requires appropriate investigation, protection, and accountability.V Pylypenko, V., Pylypenko, N., Slobozhan, O., Nahorna, O., & Tkachenko, B. (2024).explan thatEconomic inequality is another major factor affecting women's ability to escape violence and pursue justice. Women who lack independent income, property ownership, employment opportunities, and financial resources may become dependent on husbands or other family members. This dependency can create conditions in which victims remain in abusive relationships because they fear homelessness, poverty, loss of financial support, or separation from their children. Financial restrictions may also prevent women from paying for

Journal Of
Gender, Society And
Contemporary Studiesples
VOL 01 | No. 1 | 2026
P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

transportation, medical treatment, legal advice, and court proceedings. Women living in rural areas and economically marginalized households may experience additional difficulties because of limited employment opportunities and weaker access to public services. Economic dependency also interacts with social expectations that prioritize women's unpaid domestic responsibilities over financial independence. UNDP and UN Women (2025), in their work on gender justice and institutional support in Pakistan, identify the importance of improving women's access to legal counselling, case management, psychosocial services, and institutional support. Their findings emphasize that justice requires more than formal legal rights; women must also possess the practical resources needed to exercise those rights. Economic empowerment through education, vocational training, employment, financial inclusion, and property rights can therefore contribute to reducing women's vulnerability to violence.Education plays an important role in helping women understand their rights and recognize different forms of violence.

Women with limited access to education may have less information about legal protections, complaint procedures, available support services, and institutional responsibilities. Lack of legal awareness can prevent victims from recognizing that domestic abuse, forced marriage, sexual harassment, and economic control may constitute violations of their rights. Educational inequality can also reinforce harmful gender stereotypes by limiting opportunities for women to develop confidence, independent decision-making, and economic skills. In some communities, girls may face barriers to continuing education because of family expectations, financial limitations, early marriage, or concerns about mobility and safety. Such restrictions can increase economic dependency and reduce access to information. The UN Women (2023) national report on women's status in Pakistan emphasizes the importance of improving awareness among both survivors and duty-bearers. It identifies limited understanding of legal provisions and insufficient gender-sensitive training as obstacles to effective protection. Educational institutions should therefore introduce awareness programs about women's legal rights, consent, gender equality, harassment prevention, and available support services. Community education should also include men and boys because changing discriminatory attitudes requires participation from the wider society.Social stigma is one of the most significant obstacles preventing women from reporting gender-based violence in Pakistan. Victims may fear being blamed for the violence they experience or being judged by family members, neighbours, and community representatives.

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine gender-based violence against women in Pakistan, with particular attention to the social, cultural, and institutional barriers that prevent victims from obtaining justice. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on women's experiences, social attitudes, cultural expectations, institutional practices, and difficulties associated with reporting violence and pursuing legal action. The study will primarily rely on secondary data collected from academic journal articles, research publications, government documents, legal frameworks, institutional reports, and publications by national and international human rights organizations published between 2023 and 2025. Important sources will include reports from the National Commission for Human Rights, UN Women, UNDP, UNODC, the Sustainable Social Development Organization, and other relevant research institutions. The target population for the proposed research is women living in Pakistan who may have experienced

Journal Of
Gender, Society And
Contemporary Studiesples
VOL 01 | No. 1 | 2026
P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

or have knowledge of gender-based violence and barriers to justice. If primary data collection is included, approximately 20 to 30 participants may be selected through purposive sampling, including women from different educational, economic, and geographical backgrounds, alongside relevant legal professionals, social workers, and representatives of women's rights organizations. Semi-structured interviews may be used to understand participants' perspectives on domestic violence, social stigma, family pressure, police responses, judicial procedures, economic dependency, and access to support services. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, participation will be voluntary, informed consent will be obtained, and the privacy and identities of participants will be protected. No participant will be pressured to disclose personal experiences of violence, and interviews will be conducted in a safe and respectful environment. Secondary information will be selected according to its relevance, credibility, publication date, and connection with the research objectives.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study will employ a descriptive and exploratory qualitative research design to investigate gender-based violence against women in Pakistan. The descriptive component will examine the major forms of violence, including domestic abuse, sexual harassment, rape, forced marriage, honour-based violence, psychological abuse, and economic exploitation. The exploratory component will investigate the underlying social, cultural, economic, and institutional conditions that prevent women from obtaining justice. The research will use documentary analysis as its principal method of investigation, examining recent academic studies, legal documents, government policies, human rights reports, and institutional publications from 2023 to 2025. Particular attention will be given to identifying patterns of victim-blaming, social stigma, family pressure, financial dependency, weak law enforcement, judicial delays, and limited access to victim support services. The study will organize the barriers into three major analytical categories: social barriers, cultural barriers, and institutional barriers. Social barriers will include poverty, educational inequality, economic dependency, lack of legal awareness, and negative community attitudes. Cultural barriers will include patriarchal traditions, family honour, gender discrimination, restrictions on women's mobility, and the normalization of male authority. Institutional barriers will include inadequate police responses, insufficient investigation, delays in court proceedings, limited legal assistance, inadequate forensic services, and weak implementation of protective legislation. If interviews are conducted, purposive sampling will be used to select participants with relevant experiences or professional knowledge. Interview responses will be examined alongside documentary evidence to identify similarities and differences between personal experiences and institutional findings. The study will also consider differences between rural and urban environments and the availability of services across Pakistan's provinces.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis process will involve the systematic examination and interpretation of secondary information and, where available, primary interview responses to identify the major barriers affecting women's access to justice in Pakistan. Documentary information will first be collected from academic publications, government reports, legal documents, international organizations, and national human rights institutions. Each source will be reviewed according to its relevance to the research question, credibility, publication date, and contribution to understanding gender-based violence. The collected material will then be organized into thematic categories, including domestic violence, sexual violence, honour-

Journal Of
Gender, Society And
Contemporary Studiesples
VOL 01 | No. 1 | 2026
P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

based crimes, patriarchal attitudes, economic dependency, social stigma, legal awareness, police responses, judicial procedures, and institutional accountability. Thematic analysis will be used to identify recurring ideas and patterns within the available information. For example, repeated references to family pressure, fear of social rejection, and victim-blaming will be categorized under social and cultural barriers, while delayed investigations, insufficient evidence collection, and lengthy court proceedings will be categorized under institutional barriers. Quantitative statistics published by reliable organizations will also be used to provide supporting information about reported incidents, legal proceedings, conviction rates, and the availability of specialized justice services. These figures will be presented carefully because reported cases do not represent the full prevalence of gender-based violence, particularly when victims do not report incidents. Where interview data is available, responses will be transcribed, coded, and compared with the themes identified in secondary research. The researcher will examine whether participants' experiences support, contradict, or expand upon the patterns identified in published reports. A comparison between social, cultural, and institutional barriers will help identify how these factors interact. For example, economic dependency may prevent a woman from leaving an abusive household, while family pressure may discourage her from reporting violence and institutional delays may make the legal process even more difficult.

FINDINGS

The findings suggested by the reviewed literature and institutional reports indicate that gender-based violence against women in Pakistan is associated with interconnected social, cultural, economic, and institutional barriers. One of the major findings is that patriarchal social structures contribute to unequal power relationships within families and communities. Women may experience restrictions on their personal decisions, employment, education, mobility, and financial independence. These restrictions can increase vulnerability to domestic abuse and make it difficult for victims to challenge violent behaviour. Another important finding concerns social stigma and victim-blaming. Women may hesitate to report violence because they fear criticism, family rejection, damage to their reputation, and pressure to maintain family relationships. In cases of sexual violence and honour-based crimes, these concerns may become particularly serious. The reviewed literature also indicates that economic dependency can prevent women from leaving abusive environments or pursuing legal proceedings. Without independent financial resources, victims may struggle to pay for legal representation, transportation, accommodation, and other expenses associated with obtaining justice. Institutional weaknesses represent another major barrier. Although Pakistan has introduced laws and specialized mechanisms to protect women, implementation remains inconsistent. Victims may experience difficulties in registering complaints, obtaining appropriate investigations, accessing forensic services, and participating in court proceedings. Lengthy judicial procedures and insufficient victim support can further discourage women from pursuing cases. UNDP (2025) identifies slow legal processes, limited sensitization among court personnel, inadequate forensic procedures, and social stigma as significant barriers to justice.

CONCLUSION

Gender-based violence against women in Pakistan remains a serious challenge to human rights, social equality, and the effective functioning of the justice system. The study demonstrates that violence against women is not simply an individual or private issue but is

Journal Of
Gender, Society And
Contemporary Studiesples
VOL 01 | No. 1 | 2026
P-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX | E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX

closely connected with wider social structures, cultural expectations, economic inequalities, and institutional weaknesses. Patriarchal attitudes, family pressure, victim-blaming, social stigma, and traditional interpretations of family honour can discourage women from reporting abuse and seeking legal protection. Economic dependency and educational inequality further increase vulnerability by limiting women's ability to leave abusive environments and pursue legal proceedings. At the institutional level, weaknesses in police investigations, insensitive treatment, lengthy judicial procedures, insufficient legal assistance, and inadequate victim support can prevent survivors from obtaining effective justice. Although Pakistan has introduced several constitutional protections, legislative reforms, specialized courts, and institutional initiatives, the implementation of these measures remains an important challenge. The existence of laws does not automatically guarantee protection unless institutions have the resources, training, accountability, and commitment required to enforce them. The government should strengthen the implementation of existing legislation, improve police and judicial procedures, expand accessible legal aid, and establish effective protection and rehabilitation services for survivors. Specialized training should be provided to police officers, judges, healthcare professionals, and other officials who interact with victims. Furthermore, educational institutions, media organizations, civil society groups, and community leaders should promote awareness about women's rights and challenge attitudes that normalize violence or blame survivors. Economic empowerment through education, employment, vocational training, and financial inclusion is equally important because financial independence can strengthen women's ability to make personal decisions and seek protection.

REFERENCES

*cangiano, a. (*2024*). the future of population data.*

ibrahim, l. (2026). domestic violence against women in pakistan: social norms, economic dependency and barriers to justice. journal for social science studies, 4(6), 1368-1384.

pyae, k. k. (2024). a study on the role of the myanmar national human rights commission (kaung khant pyae, 2024) (doctoral dissertation, meral portal).

pylypenko, v., pylypenko, n., slobozhan, o., nahorna, o., & tkachenko, b. (2024). social inclusion in driving sustainable growth within united territorial communities. grassroots journal of natural resources, 7(3), 420-457.

united nations office on drugs. (2024). world wildlife crime report 2024: trafficking in protected species. stylus publishing, llc.