

THE PARADOX OF PROTECTION: STRUCTURAL IMPUNITY AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN PUNJAB

Madiha Nadeem

**Department of Gender and Development Studies
Lahore College For Women University, Lahore**

This article investigates the reasons for the persistent rise in violence against women (VAW) in Punjab, Pakistan, in the face of the growing legal and institutional frameworks. Employing qualitative document analysis of government reports, data from human rights abuse monitoring, and records from case studies conducted from 2025 to 2026, this study poses the question on why provinces such as Punjab with more institutions nevertheless continue to see the increase in GBV cases instead of the decline. Using the theory of legal endogeneity by Edelman (1992) and the rights vernacularization framework by Merry (2006) as a basis for understanding the circumstances surrounding VAW in Punjab, this paper claims that the protection mechanism in Punjab generates a considerable amount of costs associated with actions as per formal compliance and that the authorities are not able to deal with the situation effectively creating a large gap. More specifically, it identifies four structural gaps, which include (i) inconsistent case registration system; (ii) chronic shortage of resources allocated to the relevant services; (iii) the fact that many acts are referred to as civil and not criminal offenses; and (iv) the introduction of extrajudicial killings called “encounters.” The study suggests various structural changes, one of the changes being organizational evaluation or audits, data management systems, and independent inquiry of encounters and cases to narrow the gap between the laws and women’ safety.

Keywords: *Violence, Women, Legal Endogeneity, Institutions, Impunity, Punjab*

INTRODUCTION

It is generally believed that in Pakistan, acts of violence against women are isolated incidents. Violence is important due to the involvement of law enforcement authorities, prosecution, and judiciary, and emergence of new laws; it is a common indicator of state response. However, feminist analysis necessitates caution, as it raises the questions of whether punishment of a number of high-profile cases may be mistaken for a systemic reform (Maryam, 2021) and whether publicity given to certain “elite” or “extraordinary” cases masks the ongoing violence against women in homes, workplaces, and public areas (Manzoor et al., 2025). The argument put forward in this paper is that the recent successes achieved about accountability of the judiciary in Pakistan are real but limited. The triumphs in the field of appeal confirmation and public condemnation of crimes against women are seen as evidence of the progress achieved, yet they do not signify that the culture of impunity has changed. The concept of “impunity” used here refers not merely to the failure of prosecutions but also to the social and institutional system legitimizing violence against

women, making it impossible for women to report their suffering, weakening the existing protective system, and making justice less effective. Impunity is reproduced through patriarchal family relationships, class privileges, coercive gender norms, and institutional fragmentation (Khalid & Fatima, 2025)

Punjab plays a crucial role in this analysis. Various laws and initiatives related to women's safety have been launched in this state, such as The Punjab (Protection of Women Against Violence) Act 2016, women protection authority as well as a helpline service set by the state for women's safety. The province introduced numerous institutional solutions since 2014, producing a unique institutional architecture: among these institutions are the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW), established by the PCSW Act 2014 and endowed with the authority to issue summons and take action in shelters; the Women's Helpline 1043 operating free of charge 24 hours a day for the last nine years; the Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act 2016 amended in 2022 and now implemented through the Punjab Women Protection Authority (PWPA); and the Violence Against Women Centre (VAWC) in Multan where police reporting, medico-legal examination, prosecution assistance and counseling services are rendered under one roof. Despite that, it has been observed in recent years that cases of violence against women are still numerous. According to a fact sheet prepared in 2025 about Punjab, during the first half of 2025, 15,000 cases of violence and harassment of women were reported, meaning that 85 women become victims of violence every single day (Dawn, 2025a). According to the national parliamentary report for 2025, there were 173,367 cases of violence against women in 2021–2024 (Dawn, 2025b). Such institutional density makes the experience of Punjab necessary to study.

In recent times, two prominent trials have occupied the public debate regarding accountability. In June 2026, the Supreme Court dismissed the review petition of Zahir Jaffer and upheld the death sentence for the murder of Noor Mukadam, while at that same month Lahore High Court rejected the convicts' petitions in the notorious 2020 Lahore–Sialkot motorway gang-rape case (Dawn, 2026a, 2026b). These two judicial decisions have been interpreted as evidence that Pakistani courts are capable to impose harsh sentences in highly visible gender crime cases despite the factor of delay, influence of elite and the prevalence of misogyny. Yet, during the very months of these verdicts, there were a cluster of new dramatic cases across Punjab. For example, an eighteen-year-old domestic worker died in Lahore's Model Town area from complications incurred from a supposed gang-rape and consequent illegal abortion. In addition to that, in Sahiwal the woman and her daughter were allegedly burnt by their relatives. Two foreign nationals were also reportedly kidnapped and gang-raped in Lahore by men related to a sitting federal minister's family. The last case worth noting happened in Gujranwala where a woman and her three years old daughter were allegedly killed in a contract killing case which included a raping as well (Dawn, 2026c, 2026d; Pakistan Today, 2026a; The Media Line, 2026). All these occurrences took place not in the institutional absence but there were ongoing processes including PCSW, helpline, VAWC model and developed provincial legislation.

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's (HRCP) State of Human Rights 2025, the problem of gender-based violence is widespread and persistent. HRCP reports of a

nationwide 25% increase in cases of gender-based violence in 2025, totaling 6,543 cases of gender-based violence over eleven months, with Punjab alone accounting for 78% of those cases (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2026). The same report states that there have been 1,332 murders related to domestic violence in Pakistan, 3,815 cases of rape, and 470 victims of crimes motivated by honor (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan 2026; Pakistan Today 2026b). Despite the presence of specialized institutions in this province, it is indeed the source of most instances of violence against women. This is a phenomenon that cannot be accounted for by the existence or absence of institutions as such. This paper examines why, in view of the existence of agencies such as the Women Protection Authority and the VAWC model in Punjab, violence against women remains a growing phenomenon in this province. The central argument made in the research paper is that the acknowledgment of guilt by way of appellate confirmation represents an achievement of limited magnitude, because it does not preclude the negative impact of earlier failures: that is, the cases not being recorded properly, understaffed and poorly funded shelters, reliance on extrajudicial killings instead of prosecution, and law and legislation that still view domestic violence mostly as civil matter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Legal scholarship in the field of feminist studies asserts in Pakistan that the violence directed against women must not be interpreted as mere acts of criminal behavior but as a systematic manifestation of gender inequality created by social systems, economic reliance and social institutions designed to vary men's and women's roles (Sattar et al., 2022). Farid (2025) states that the system does not take into consideration psychological violence but focuses solely on the physical one. This is especially true for Punjab, where the Protection of Women Against Violence Act 2016 was intended to include new types of violence in legislation, such as psychological, economic and cyber violence (Punjab Commission on the Status of Women, n.d.-a). However, the implementation of the Act is not up to the required standards. Ahmad (2023), the author of an insightful analysis of the Protection of Women Against Violence Act, 2016 indicates that the definitions in the Act are still unclear (including the concept of “aggrieved persons”), that it uses the civil law and does not provide sufficient punishment for torturers and that the problem is not rooted in the legislative errors, but rather in the unwillingness of the institutions of power to act against men (Ahmad, 2023).

The above renders obsolete the arguments about the immediate implementation of the legislative innovations as the well-developed legislative norm will work in practice only if there is an appropriate implementing body. The independent analysis of the VAWC program operating in Punjab supports this observation. To collect data about the operations of the service delivery centers, the PCSW arranged for a study of the clients' satisfaction. The findings of the study showed a high level of satisfaction of the clients at VAWC in Multan when compared with the same figures for the analogue institutions in Faisalabad and Rawalpindi, but the presence of limited resources and social stigma were named among the biggest challenges to the successful work of the centers (Warraich, 2020). Then, several investigative reports disclosed that the center had not

had a manager, a senior psychologist, a staff doctor, an X-ray doctor and staff to carry out the needed analysis, thus forcing survivor women to reach the public hospital for the procedures despite the existence of such a center (Loksujag, 2022).

Issues related to public health justify the existence of a gap in the justice system (Sarfraz et al., (2022). In 2016, in Punjab, the conviction rate for rape cases was only 4% (99 convictions out of 2,343 cases). Notably, during the same year, it was noted that around 70% to 90% of surveyed married women experienced abuse from their husbands at least once in their lives. In the phenomenological research conducted by Sattar et al. (2022) on intimate partner violence in Southern Punjab, it was revealed that law enforcement and judicial authorities can render women victims in the society. The police and courts operate through stereotypes and victim blaming, thus failing to solve the issue, but rather becoming an obstacle. The research conducted by the Women Development Department and the UN Women confirmed that legal tools present in the province of Punjab must be revised continually. It is also essential to mention national statistics mentioned by UNFPA Pakistan (n.d.). The data state that 28% of women aged 15-49 was subjected to physical violence, 6% experienced sexual violence, while 34% of ever-married women stated that they suffered from spousal abuse at least 1 time in their life. Besides, 56% of women did not contact anyone for help after experiencing violence due to dependence on husband and other sociocultural and economic constraints. The summary of the National Report on the Status of Women published by UN Women Pakistan (2023) states that up to 59% of women in different provinces think that domestic violence is justifiable in some situations. These sources do not indicate that Punjab is particularly permissive when it comes to social attitudes; rather, its reporting processes appear to contribute to its uniqueness in the number of reported incidents. Law enforcement and judicial systems may be guilty of revictimizing women by means of stereotyping, victim blaming, and poor practices.”

The basis distinction is made in literature between the enactment of laws and their effective application. Although subsequent to the restrictive Zina Ordinance, during the evolution of the rape law, numerous amendments have been made that brought Pakistan closer to the establishment of survivor-centric provisions embedded in the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act of 2021, numerous sources are warning that these constitutional developments have not resulted in the establishment of survivor-centric institutions (Sarfraz, 2024). It appears that the reason behind the lack of operational institutions is the fact that gender-based violence is deeply rooted in the sociocultural context allowing this phenomenon to exist in the loopholes of the enforcement mechanism as well as in the structure of the justice system despite the fact that anti-violence laws have been expanded (Tanveer, 2024). This means that violence against women should not be treated as purely a set of isolated criminal acts. The study of honor-based violence indicates that despite the passing of the amendments in 2004 and 2016 banning honor killings, the inefficacy of judiciary, the mechanism of compromise, and qisas-diyat provision, alongside the continued influence of the tribal community enabled the offenders to avoid adequate punishment (Talha et al., 2024). NCSW’s studies of jirgas corroborates the hypothesis that informal organizations continue issuing rulings contrary to the law at the institutional level (National Commission on the

Status of Women, 2017). Thus, the existence of the structural impunity has been verified by numerous assessments (UNFPA, n.d.) while the fact that numerous protective measures have been introduced in Punjab shows that there are formal mechanisms in place to eliminate violence against women but they are not sufficient in terms of coverage and funding (Punjab Commission on the Status of Women, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

In summary, this literature presents three propositions that guide the analysis. The first one states that laws and institutions in Punjab concerned with violence against women are well organized on paper but insufficiently funded. The second one claims that the results of appeals in known cases must be treated as a separate category of outcomes rather than included into considerations of how good institutions operate, because the same period that brought Noor Mukadam and motorway cases also saw emergence of new problems. And finally, the third one argues for the necessity to consider not just the overall number of convictions in Punjab, but also consider informal and illegal responses, like extrajudicial killings committed by police.

THEORETICAL LENS

The paper is structured around a concept key to law-and-society scholarship: that of the distinction between the law's enactment and its incorporation into practice. The article discusses the important distinction known in law-and-society studies as the difference between legal enactment and legal functioning "on the ground." Edelman's (1992) theory suggests that organizations respond to ambiguous and poorly enforced law by forming visible representations of compliance. Thus, they are being perceived by courts and civil society as complying with the law even though the actions of these organizations do not change in reality because of their creating symbols of compliance. The dynamics of this process are demonstrated in Punjab through the emergence of many protective measures such as legislation enacted in 2016-2017, which have been established so far to make visible the commitment of the Punjab government to eliminate violence against women. Edelman's model suggests that ambiguously enforced protective legislation is expected to emerge, but the rate of proliferation has surpassed the ability to enforce these laws effectively. On the other hand, Merry's (2006) anthropological theory on the transfer of international laws into local systems highlights that the implications of human rights systems being imported into local systems are mediated by existing structures of power: family authority, class privilege and informal systems of dispute resolution; thus, instead of being replaced by formal legal changes, informal justice systems emerge which are present alongside them in Punjab's case as seen in jirga-type justice systems existing as a form of informal justice (National Commission on the Status of Women, 2017).

Htun and Weldon (2012) have also warned that successful VAW reform not only relies on laws; it also requires the independent action of women's movements rather than passing of appropriate legislative or providing economic assistance for the process. The analysis of the situation in Punjab based on this finding proves that the reform has been achieved mainly through the institution-building efforts supported by the donors (UN Women, UNFPA) rather than through the work of independent feminist organizations that play the role of the monitor in the process of

reform. All these frameworks enable differentiation between two concepts: accountability at the appellate level and the capacity for institutional prevention.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative document analysis informed by feminist legal studies and case study method to comprehend the reason behind why the growing institutional framework of Punjab for addressing gender-based violence hasn't reduced the incidence of reported cases of such violence. To improve the rigor of methodology, this research employs a planned document identification method. The documents were located through keyword searches among academic platforms like (NCSW, PCSW, HRCP) and databases (SciSpace, Google Scholar) and limited to the ones published between 2024 and 2026 pertaining to VAW legislation in Punjab.

There are data from three kinds of sources. official and semi-official institutional documents include published reports, statutes, and website content from UNFPA Pakistan, UN Women Pakistan, the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW), and the Punjab Women Protection Authority (PWPA). However, only those documents that disclose legislative provisions, institutional mandates, and statistics about services provided in Punjab were utilized. The data also come from human rights monitoring executed by Human Rights Commission of Pakistan; the researchers took information mostly from HRCP's State of Human Rights 2025 report (HRCP, 2026). Some data from NCSW (2024) provincial analysis of gender-based violence in Punjab helped with cross-checking statistics mentioned by the media with those collected by the monitoring body. Peer-reviewed literature was comprehensively searched via Google Scholar with the use of search queries that included terms 'Punjab', 'violence against women', 'gender-based violence', 'law', and 'institution'. This made it possible for the researchers to narrow down the number of studies to only those that meet their criteria. There were two types of sample cases drawn for the 2025-2026 period: benchmark appellate cases which included cases of Noor Mukadam and the case of a gang-rape which occurred in 2020, as well as contemporaneous cases which took place in Model Town, Sahiwal, DHA Lahore, and Gujranwala. In order to identify cases of extrajudicial killings, researchers relied on Voicepk's investigative reporting which was cross-checked with HRCP's national statistics. The information used for case reporting was obtained only from English-language accounts of news agencies that specialize in covering cases of law violations (Dawn, Pakistan Today, The Media Line, Voicepk) while data from single or unverified sources was not used.

The analysis of data was conducted using a two-cycle coding approach (Saldaña, 2021). The process began with the first cycle of descriptive coding, which revealed the institutional actions discussed within each document (i.e. case registration, staffing, funding, case outcome, and offence's categorization). The second cycle of pattern coding grouped these into four recurrent structural gaps - inconsistency in registration, chronic underfunding, civil instead of criminal law categorization, and law enforcement outside the courtroom after applying Edelman's (1992) notion of legal endogeneity and Merry's (2006) concept of rights vernacularization in order to distinguish

between the gaps that signify symbolic compliance and those indicating the simultaneous existence of other justice mechanisms. A case-by-code matrix with cases and institutions in the rows and pattern codes in the columns was created to facilitate the inter-case comparison. Triangulation was used to ensure the credibility of the study: it allowed for receiving confirmation of the institutional performance claims for at least two sources of information, including at least one statistic provided by a relevant institution or monitoring body as well as either a peer-reviewed or investigation-based information source, and checking the cases from multiple outlets whenever certain case was reported by more than one source. During the analysis, an audit trail of search queries, retrieval dates, and coding choices were kept. Potential influence of the authors' positionality on case choice and interpretation is discussed in the Limitations section.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Punjab's protection architecture and its formal scope

The violence against women response system in Punjab consists of four components: (i) the establishment of the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW), an authority that was set up in 2014 and has the power of summoning documents and checking functions of the shelters; (ii) the establishment of a Women helpline number 1043 which has been giving free consultations to the needy persons regarding legal matters since 2014; (iii) the introduction of the Protection of Women against Violence Act in 2016/2022 which has initiated the concept of Women Protection Officers in every district along with Women Protection Committees and Women Protection Centers; and (iv) the implementing the Violence against Women Centre model that merges police, legal, medical and psychological services under one roof wherein the new model has been piloted from March 2017 in Multan and later been integrated into the Punjab Women Protection Authority initiative. On paper, this seems to be one of the most extensively developed systems in South Asia for tackling the problem of violence against women. However, considering the nature and scale of the violence against women in Punjab, it is evident that sometimes even well-established systems do not guarantee desired outcomes.

Appellate accountability as a real but narrow achievement

The Supreme Court's ruling in June 2026 denying Zahir Jaffer's review plea and upholding the sentence of death in the Noor Mukadam case alongside the Lahore High Court's rejection of the appeals of accused in the 2020 motorway gang-rape case are both significant (Dawn, 2026a, 2026b). These cases show that even though there have been delays in the process of trial and despite the elite status and pressure to shift the blame onto the victims, appellate courts could impose stiff penalties. In addition, the Noor Mukadam judgement's use of the 'silent witness theory' to accept digital evidence has also added strength to the prosecution in the future cases where technological evidence was used (Dawn, 2026a). However, the efforts at accountability are post-facto as they offer punishment only after women had been killed and raped with systemic media and civil-society challenges. Hence, a feminist assessment of the justice system in Punjab should ask whether the same institutions that punished these crimes prevented these atrocities from being committed, the answer based on the evidence in front of us is in the negative.

Recent Punjab cases despite existing protections

On the same day that the Noor Mukadam appeal and the motorway case were heard, it was reported that an employer's son and driver in the Model Town area of Lahore had allegedly gang-raped an 18-year-old domestic servant whose case had perhaps been hidden by the employer for fear of police involvement. The news only broke after her death resulting from complications related to abortion and, following her murder, one of the alleged perpetrators was arrested while the others were granted bail (Dawn, 2026c). In Sahiwal, it was reported that a woman who had already separated from her husband and earned her living as a domestic worker was supposedly poured petrol on and set on fire along with her child by her spouse and brother-in-law (Dawn, 2026d). In Lahore's Defense Housing Authority, medical tests confirmed the abuse of two foreign nationals who had allegedly been abducted and raped in a gang including a relative of a senior government official; the police claimed that the case operated on the orders of the Chief Minister of Punjab and that no favoritism has been shown, thus highlighting the need for high-level intervention even in cases involving connected criminals (The Media Line, 2026). In Gujranwala, a woman and her three-year-old daughter were killed in what the police described as a contract killing done at the behest of her husband, who separately confessed to having raped her (Pakistan Today, 2026). These four cases can be seen to represent various cases within the social and economic range intended to be served equally by institutions in Punjab: a poor domestic worker, a woman who has fled her abusive marriage, foreigners without support, or a woman killed in her home. The violence in each of these cases either preceded the operating system of the state or bypassed it completely. The domestic worker's suffering was supposedly hidden for months before she died, while the woman from Sahiwal did not receive any protection following her departure from her husband, and the case from DHA required intervention at the height of the Punjab administration.

A parallel and troubling institutional response: encounter killings

A critical pattern consistently observed in Punjab is the killing of individuals suspected of rape through police "encounters" instead of resorting to the judicial process that the PPWVA and VAWC model were created to assist. In April 2026, a man suspected of kidnapping and sexually assaulting a 13-year-old girl in Gujranwala was assassinated in police custody, with police alleging that he was killed by his accomplices; a similar occurrence took place in Sohdra in March in which another suspect was shot, as per the police, who claimed that the suspect was killed while taking the police to recover the murder weapon (Voicepk, 2026). Investigative journalists revealed that a minimum of fourteen other individuals suspected of rape or gang rape were encountered by police in Punjab between May and August 2025, with the police presenting similar accounts involving accomplices in every case (Voicepk, 2026). The HRCP reported in 2025 that Punjab's Crime Control Department caused 977 of the total of 1,696 deaths classified as police encounters across the country that year (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2026; Pakistan Today, 2026b), and has demanded the implementation of an independent province-wide moratorium on police encounters until reform of oversight takes place (Voicepk, 2026). This instance ought to be seen as manifestation of a structural gap and not merely as an instance of accountability. Encounter killings deprive the case of trial, cross-examination, and fact-finding through a court of law. They create

no conviction statistics, no compensation, and no evidence or record showing guilt beyond normal legal practices. This is an issue of importance in the feminist interpretation of accountability since it may appear to reflect the readiness of the government to deal with violations against women, albeit replacing the sight of a killed suspect with legal safeguards of due process of law.

Structural gaps identified

An analysis of case studies and available literature shows four structural inaccuracies, which are better considered as consequences of legal endogeneity (Edelman, 1992) than circumstantial malfunction. To start with, there is a disparity between the registration and its aftermath; in the Model Town situation, there were months of abuse, while a helpline and Protection officers existed. At the same time, the matter was that the violence occurred in a private employer-client relation where no means were available to properly make a report. In Edelman's terms, the helpline and Officer positions can merely serve as the indicators of institutional responsiveness, while only a few respond to the informal context of the abuse. To continue with, the mandate and resources don't match: Multan VAWC can boast of much client satisfaction (Warraich, 2020) but has not had specialists in the period of operation. Moreover, in the given case, the demand for services increased about eight times in comparison with the initial level (Loksujag, 2022; Punjab Women Protection Authority, n.d.).

In this case, the situation is consistent with what Edelman believes; the center itself is the compliance institution yet lacks financial means maintaining it. A third significant aspect is that the legal classification does not allow deterrence to happen. As per Ahmad's (2023) research, civil law interpretation of PPWVA and unresolved definition of "aggrieved person" lead to very few criminal tools being available in court. As Sarfraz et al. (2022) show, the level of conviction for rape is only about four percent, which aligns with the idea that existing ambiguities give rise to symbolic law-making that does not change the situation. The finally is the growth of extrajudicial killings, or "encounters" what lends itself better to Merry's (2006) framework rather than Edelman's. In the former case, this gap takes place and the encounter killings are a legal alternative to the normal justice process of Punjab. Hence, they are like the system of jirgas mentioned by the National Commission on Women (2017).

Edelman (1992) argues that the four structural gaps proposed in this research; incremental registration, chronic failure of resourcing, civil instead of criminal case law, and the rise of extrajudicial executions are a natural outcome of the introduction of far-reaching guarantees without true corresponding mechanisms of enforcement, illustrated by how Women's Protection Officers, Committees, and Centers work under PPWVA 2016 in order to resolve institutional needs, while the notion of an aggrieved person and the qualification of domestic violence cases remain vague (Ahmad, 2023). The model offered by Merry (2006) makes it clear why this decorative structure continues to exist alongside informal and extrajudicial formulas against injustice, substantiated by the fact that jirgas still function (National Commission on the Status of Women, 2017) and that police killings in Punjab account for 977 out of the 1696 of encounters having taken place in Pakistan in 2025 (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2026; Pakistan Today, 2026b).

In the context of Edelman's (1992) legal endogeneity, the extensive network of VAWC centers and Protection Officers in Punjab acts as a "symbolic shield." This network demonstrates that the government conforms with international human rights standards (CEDAW) without changing its organizational approach, as shown by its continuous use of informal means of conflict resolution. Merry's (2006) concept of vernacularization helps to make sense of the "mistranslation" of protection laws: although the government adopts the discourse of protection, local actors may present such measures as a danger to the "sanctity of family." As a result, the protective centers coexist with illegal practices, such as extrajudicial killings, that circumvent the human rights framework altogether.

To sum up, in line with the conclusion of Htun and Weldon (2012) that long-term success of policy boils down to the sustained pressure of civil society and not just institutional strengthening from above, we observe in Punjab that despite the high number of institutions (such as PCSW, VAWC, Helpline 1043, PWPA), there has not been a sufficient decrease in the level of violence. While the necessary institutions are in place, there has not been an adequate level of civic oversight and pressure to transform formal compliance into actual protection.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The state of Punjab seems to be contradictory, claiming to have the strongest protective legislation in the country, but still witnessing one of the highest rates of violence against women. For example, the Supreme Court confirmed Noor Mukadam's court ruling while the Lahore High Court rejected the motorway case ruling and this proves that justice does take place in the province. However, the cases involving Model Town, Sahiwal, Lahore DHA and Gujranwala cases prove that this success comes short of earlier-stage prevention, reliable due process for the victims and proper management in some cases. Hence, based on the presented problems, there are multiple practical and evidence-based measures to contribute to the solving of the issues identified. First, independent audits of VAWC and Protection Centre staffing in each district should be conducted to see whether the institutions operating in the provinces are adequately funded. This would give them a chance to improve their work as the case in Multan clearly demonstrates. Lately, high satisfaction with the services provided have been recorded, though positions in medical service remain vacant. Second, the Punjab Women Protection Authority must expand the operational scope of the monitoring of the VAWC across the country. According to the data provided by the Multan Women Protection Centre, the tenfold increase in the number of cases reported calls for a revision of the approaches and methods used for the treatment of the potential cases (Punjab Women Protection Authority, n.d.). Third, legislative doctrines on issues mentioned above necessitate relevant classification of the offences, as indicated by Ahmad's (2023) research results that it is criminal approach which leads to proper responses by the offenders. Fourth, an approach proposed by HRCP concerning the huge scope of encounter killings in Punjab should be realized, as now it is suggested that the involvement of external independent organizations be mandatory in numerous cases, as exemplified by the necessity of conducting the inquiries in all future custodial deaths rather than putting it on the colluding parties. Fifth, safe channels should

be created to report the cases and refer women workers, particularly domestic workers and anyone in vulnerable jobs. Sixth, PCSW and NCSW should merge their data management systems so that the analysis is performed and uniformity is achieved.

Punjab's cases suggest that the expansion of laws and institutions is necessary but insufficient. Noor Mukadam and motorway cases should be lauded as examples of accountability but should not be interpreted as indications of the system protecting women's security before violence occurs. Until the aspects of registration, funding, and legal classification are all strengthened, the gap between Punjab's protective laws and women's safety will not decrease, regardless of the number of institutions being created. In addition, it should be emphasized that the increasing number of cases is not only degrading; HRCP's statistics for Punjab (2026) indicate that in fact the action and call centers are working better than those in other provinces, producing higher statistics on cases than they would otherwise be. This adds urgency to the issue: while many provinces don't know the problem's scope, Punjab has it already, and the increasing number of cases indicates that lack of information is not the problem; the issue persists because of lack of enforcement potential, desire to act in practice, and the implementation of due process for victims of violence. The feminist approach to the statistics of Punjab in 2025 and 2026 should produce two conclusions: courts can provide justice in proper conditions, while the system of protection cannot be proved capable of preventing the violence that leads to the requirement of justice. It is concluded that based on level of enforcement, due process, and accountability, Punjab's protective system will only be able to furnish good information on violence.

LIMITATIONS

The reliance on English-language news sources to gather case-level information is so deliberate in the context of the lack of an existing publicly accessible case-level database for GBV incidents in Punjab and is not merely an incidental constraint. Attempts have been made to triangulate where possible the claims made in relation to these sources against statistics provided by other monitoring organizations or institutions (e.g., HRCP, 2026; National Commission on the Status of Women, 2024) and cross-checked through newspapers reporting on the same case.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, S. (2023). *Gender-based violence in Punjab: An analysis of Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act, 2016*. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*, 23(1), 105–124. <https://doi.org/10.46568/pjgs.v23i01.642>
- Dawn. (2025a, November 21). *Punjab saw over 15,000 gender-based violence cases this year*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1956328>
- Dawn. (2025b, November 8). *Over 7,500 women murdered in four years, minister tells NA*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1953842>

- Dawn. (2026a, June 4). *Noor Mukadam case: SC dismisses Zahir Jaffer's review plea, upholds death sentence*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/2005168/noor-mukadam-case-sc-dismisses-zahir-jaffers-review-plea-upholds-death-sentence>
- Dawn. (2026b, June 3). *2020 motorway gang rape case: LHC dismisses convicts' appeals against sentences*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/2004896/2020-motorway-gang-rape-case-lhc-dismisses-convicts-appeals-against-sentences>
- Dawn. (2026c, June 3). *Gang rape victim dies during botched abortion in Lahore*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/2004730/gang-rape-victim-dies-during-botched-abortion-in-lahore>
- Dawn. (2026d, June 7). *Woman, daughter set ablaze by husband, brother-in-law in Sahiwal*. <https://www.dawn.com/news/2005711/woman-daughter-set-ablaze-by-husband-brother-in-law-in-sahiwal>
- Edelman, L. B. (1992). Legal ambiguity and symbolic structures: Organizational mediation of civil rights law. *American Journal of Sociology*, 97(6), 1531–1576. <https://doi.org/10.1086/229939>
- Farid, S. (2025). Coercive control and domestic violence laws in Pakistan: A feminist legal analysis of legislative gaps. *Social Science Review Archives*, 3(2), 1780–1791. <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i2.797>
- Htun, M., & Weldon, S. L. (2012). The civic origins of progressive policy change: Combating violence against women in global perspective, 1975–2005. *American Political Science Review*, 106(3), 548–569. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055412000226>
- Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. (2026). *State of human rights in 2025*. <https://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2026-State-of-human-rights-in-2025-EN.pdf>
- Khalid, H., & Fatima, N. (2025). Fighting Gender-Based Violence in Pakistan: The Role of Public Policy in Addressing Contemporary Challenges. *Pakistan Journal of Law, Analysis and Wisdom*, 4(12), 13-27.
- Loksujag. (2022, March 24). *Victim of neglect: Multan's centre for helping women in distress fails to achieve its objective*. <https://loksujag.com/story/violence-against-women-centre-multan>
- Merry, S. E. (2006). *Human rights and gender violence: Translating international law into local justice*. University of Chicago Press.
- Manzoor, S., Mumtaz, M. M., Batool, S., & Khan, T. (2025). Unfolding the Truth: A Chronological Analysis of the Qandeel Baloch Murder Case in the Context of Honour, Gender, and Criminal Liability in Pakistan. *Journal of Political Stability Archive*, 3(2), 1386-1408.

- Maryam, H. (2021, September 21). *Can Social Media Bring Justice for Women in Pakistan?* Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/21/pakistan-noor-mukadam-social-media-justice/>
- National Commission on the Status of Women. (2017). *Women, violence and jirga: Consensus and impunity in Pakistan* (2nd ed.). [https://ncsw.gov.pk/SiteImage/Downloads/Women, Violence and Jirgas Consensus and Impunity in Pakistan.pdf](https://ncsw.gov.pk/SiteImage/Downloads/Women,Violence and Jirgas Consensus and Impunity in Pakistan.pdf)
- National Commission on the Status of Women. (2024). *Provincial analysis of gender-based violence in Pakistan (2024): Punjab*. National Gender Data Portal. <https://ngdp-ncsw.org.pk/knowledgehub>
- Pakistan Today. (2026a, April 30). *Husband arrested for contract killing of wife, daughter*. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2026/04/30/husband-arrested-for-contract-killing-of-wife-daughter>
- Pakistan Today. (2026b, May 5). *HRCF report flags shrinking civic space and rights concerns in 2025*. <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2026/05/05/hrcf-report-flags-shrinking-civic-space-and-rights-concerns-in-2025>
- Punjab Commission on the Status of Women. (n.d.). *Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act, 2016*. https://pcsw.punjab.gov.pk/protection_women_against_violence
- Punjab Women Protection Authority. (n.d.). *Services: Violence Against Women Centre, Multan*. <https://pwpa.punjab.gov.pk/services>
- Sarfraz, A., Sarfraz, Z., Sarfraz, M., & Qarnain, Z. (2022). Gender-based violence in Pakistan and public health measures: A call to action. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization*, 100(7), 462–464. <https://doi.org/10.2471/BLT.21.287188>
- Sarfraz, R. (2024). Evolution of rape laws in Pakistan: A comparative analysis (1979–2021). *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 63(2), 49–65. <https://doi.org/10.46568/jssh.v63i2.766>
- Sattar, T., Ahmad, S., & Asim, M. (2022). Intimate partner violence against women in Southern Punjab, Pakistan: A phenomenological study. *BMC Women's Health*, 22(1), 505. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-022-02095-0>
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. sage.
- Talha, A., Noor, S., Mingfei, M. A., & Sardar, T. (2024). Judicial inefficacies and legal inconsistencies in addressing honour killings: A human rights analysis of Pakistan's legal framework. *Pakistan Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 12(4), 2931–2941. <https://doi.org/10.52131/pjhss.2024.v12i4.2438>

- Tanveer, A. (2024). Gender-based violence and legal frameworks for protection: A Pakistani perspective. *International Review of Business and Social Sciences*, 4(2), 13–22. <https://irbss.org/index.php/IRBSS/article/view/38>
- The Media Line. (2026, July 5). *Relative of Pakistani foreign minister arrested on alleged kidnapping, rape and extortion charges*. <https://themedialine.org/headlines/relative-of-pakistani-foreign-minister-arrested-on-alleged-kidnapping-rape-and-extortion-charges/>
- UN Women Pakistan. (2023). *Summary: National report on the status of women in Pakistan*. https://pakistan.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/summary_-_nrsw-inl_final.pdf
- UNFPA Pakistan. (n.d.). *Gender-based violence*. <https://pakistan.unfpa.org/en/topics/gender-based-violence-6>
- Voicepk. (2026, April 6). *Gujranwala: Another suspected rapist killed in police encounter*. <https://voicepk.net/2026/04/gujranwala-another-suspected-rapist-killed-in-police-encounter/>
- Warraich, S. A. (2020). *Special mechanisms to address violence against women in Punjab: A study of the Model Gender-Based Violence Court in Lahore and the Violence Against Women Centre in Multan*. Punjab Commission on the Status of Women & ShirkatGah. https://shirkatgah.org/shirkat/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/PCSW_SAW-Study_Print-version_Ff.pdf