

# Beyond Boundaries: Addressing Women's Rights In Pakistan

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## Abstract

*This paper, "Beyond Boundaries: Addressing Women's Rights in Pakistan," delves into the complexities of advancing women's rights in a country marked by significant cultural, social, and legal challenges. Despite the implementation of significant laws such as the Protection of Women Against Violence Act and the Anti-Rape Ordinance, Pakistani women continue to face systemic obstacles like socio-economic disparities, cultural resistance to change, and limited political will. This paper aims to explore these complexities, analyzing the interplay between legislation, societal attitudes, and institutional practices. The methodology involves a qualitative approach that integrates a comprehensive literature review, case study analysis, and expert interviews. The results reveal legal reforms, economic empowerment, educational enhancement, healthcare access, cultural change, and gendersensitive curriculum reforms to promote gender equality. To overcome above obstacles, the paper recommends strengthening the enforcement mechanisms of existing laws by providing better training and create a more inclusive and equitable environment for women in Pakistan, moving beyond current boundaries and towards meaningful progress.*

## Keywords:

*Gender equality, cultural norms, healthcare access, legal reforms, discrimination and Violence, cultural change, criminal*

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## **Introduction**

To start, every state keeps building its institutions to uphold the law for the community's safety and security. Particularly, these institutions fortify women's empowerment by defending their legal and constitutional rights, as no nation can progress and prosper without women's advancement. All international forums raise voices in favour of women's rights to protect them from exploitation and harassment. In fact, UNO's many organisations have mechanisms in place to monitor human rights breaches and violence against women, especially in developing nations.

International law guarantees fundamental rights to all individuals. It is the responsibility of governments to uphold and safeguard these rights. The Universal Periodic Review evaluates the human rights record of all 193 member states annually, while the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights addresses violations using various tools.

The Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism in Pakistan allows NGOs and stakeholders to influence the review process, monitoring state recommendations and pledges. The first UPR was conducted in 2008, with most recommendations accepted. In 2012, the Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre submitted a joint submission on women's rights and challenges.

Astonishingly, women's rights violations in developing countries are widespread, leading to domestic violence, sexual violence, forced marriages, and economic and educational barriers. Cultural norms, inadequate legal protections, and poor enforcement exacerbate these issues. In India, 30% of women experience physical violence, while 72.6% experience partner violence. Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bhutan face similar issues due to cultural norms and workplace discrimination. Addressing these violations requires comprehensive reforms, educational initiatives, and cultural shifts.

Pakistan should not be held accountable for human rights abuses, as most countries struggle with these rights. The main focus should be understanding and addressing human rights violations and providing modern necessities like water, food, shelter, work, education, equality, justice, and freedom of expression to the destitute in developing countries. NATO members should be at the forefront of the battle against poverty and fundamental human rights, as they are now ignoring other issues, like Pakistan, which is a shining example of this indifference.

Laws in Pakistan guarantee women's rights, but cultural taboos, customary issues, high dropout rates, and limited access to education often prevent their enforcement. Patriarchal norms further restrict women's economic opportunities and social mobility. The current crisis exacerbates these issues, as societal and legal systems fail to provide effective protection and support. Despite legislative efforts, the pace of tangible change remains slow.

Gender inequality in Pakistan is a structural problem, with women facing differing degrees of subordination depending on their class, geography, and whether they live in an urban or rural area. Tribal, feudal, and capitalist social forms, along with unequal socioeconomic growth, significantly impact women's lives. The nation has both a civil and sharia legal system, and many communities follow Purdah principles based on family customs, geography, social status, and whether they live in an urban or rural area.

Child marriage is illegal for girls under 16, but common in rural areas. Dowry is prevalent, causing over 2000 deaths annually and 2.45 deaths per 100,000 women from violence. Women with lenient punishments primarily commit honour killings. In 2016, Pakistan repealed a loophole allowing forgiveness, leading to legal pardons.

Pakistan has made significant strides in improving women's rights, but challenges remain, including patriarchal norms, inadequate criminal justice systems, political willlessness, male dominance, corrupt institutions, and cultural barriers. Women also face discrimination, unequal pay, and slow career development in the workplace. Non-governmental organisations and advocacy campaigns are often uncoordinated and lack sincerity, serving enigmatic agendas and serving the enigmatic needs of abuse victims.

Pakistan's female candidates are primarily based on family and clan connections, with women only representing half of the electorate. This lack of grassroots representation in poorer regions makes Pakistan a notional democracy for women. Although women's political engagement has increased, obstacles remain. Reserved seats and laws encourage women to enter politics.

Pakistan's female MPs' political engagement is high, but their influence may be limited by political dynamics and patriarchal traditions. To ensure female representation, we should implement reforms that strengthen legal protections, resolve sociocultural obstacles, prevent harassment and discrimination, enhance resource accessibility, encourage women's leadership, and ensure women hold prominent positions in legislatures. Addressing patriarchal norms and religious taboos requires more education, economic empowerment, skill development, leadership roles, and elevating rural poor women, especially in rural Sindh, Baluchistan, KPK Province, and FATA areas.

Pakistan faces challenges in empowering women in local government due to patriarchal norms, lack of resources, violence, harassment, and insufficient enforcement of legal quotas. To address these, the government should strengthen legal frameworks, provide security guarantees, introduce gender-sensitive training, promote accountability, and create women's leadership roles. Despite a 33% increase in women's representation, cultural norms, a lack of party support, and security concerns persist.

Pakistan is grappling with a high rate of violence against women, with over 5,000 reported cases in 2022. Factors contributing to this include patriarchal norms, financial dependence, and weak domestic violence laws. Honor killings and acid attacks are also prevalent, particularly among marginalised women. Despite criminalizing domestic violence,

the government faces challenges in implementation due to patriarchal norms, a lack of women's empowerment, and weak judicial responses.

Pakistan's home-based work, particularly for women, employs around 12 million workers, with 80% of the workforce engaged in stitching, embroidery, handicrafts, and food processing. However, they face poor working conditions, irregular pay, a lack of social protections, and exploitation by middlemen. The government has established the Home-Based Women Workers Federation and provided social security benefits, but more comprehensive policies are needed to improve working conditions and economic security.

Minority women in Pakistan face numerous challenges, including discrimination, violence, lack of access to education and healthcare, economic marginalization, political underrepresentation, and intersectional issues. Religious minorities like Hindus, Christians, and Ahmadis are particularly vulnerable, and law enforcement often fails to protect them. Middle-class women face lower literacy rates and healthcare access, while poverty, social norms, and discrimination limit their empowerment. Addressing these challenges requires an intersectional approach, considering gender, religious, ethnic, and socioeconomic discrimination.

Islamic sharia law inheritance laws in Pakistan have resulted in the denial of full inheritance shares to women, particularly in rural and conservative areas, and the pressure to relinquish their rightful inheritance. This lower economic and social status puts them at risk of exploitation, domestic violence, limited access to education and jobs, and restrictions on personal freedoms. Despite efforts by organizations and initiatives to empower women, challenges remain, including entrenched patriarchal attitudes, a lack of implementation, and continued social and family pressures.

The Pakistani Supreme Court ruled in January 2019 that the functioning of Jirgas and Panchayats was unconstitutional, as they violated fundamental rights, especially those of women. The court emphasized that alternative justice systems cannot replace the established legal system, and that only the court has the power to decide legal issues. The ruling established constitutional recourse mechanisms, including implementing essential rights, judicial supervision, awareness initiatives, and legislative measures to prevent these entities from functioning.

Pakistan faces a significant issue with young-age marriage, with 40% of females getting married by 18 and 13% by 1537. Child marriage is the country's leading cause of maternal death per 20 minutes. The Child Marriage Restriction Act sets a minimum age of 16 for females and 18 for boys, but it has negative effects on physical, emotional, and mental health. A holistic, rights-based approach is needed to address these gaps and strengthen enforcement.

With reports of rape, exploitation, discrimination, economic hardship, sexual harassment, killings, and other crimes, Pakistan still violates the rights of women. Women in economically disadvantaged regions of the nation consistently lack access to financial, social, emotional, political, and educational rights due to illiteracy and anti-Islamic cultural and traditional norms. These problems draw attention to the continuous fight for women's rights in Pakistan and emphasise the necessity for more action.

Over 12 billion Pakistani women face abuse, harassment, and lack constitutional rights to education, political participation, employment, and social progress. Supporting organizations face discrimination, bigotry, hypocrisy, and double standards. Illiteracy,

fanaticism, a deficient criminal justice system, and male cynicism withhold women's constitutional rights. A lack of funding for modernizing institutions and elevating women's status results in slow development. Women's rights planning lacks vision and priority, hindering the nation's progress.

### **Literature Review**

A comprehensive examination of the literature on women's rights in Pakistan underscores the multifaceted challenges hindering progress and potential pathways for improvement. Historically, Pakistan has grappled with entrenched gender inequalities despite constitutional assurances. Discriminatory laws, notably the Hudood Ordinances, have perpetuated disparities, especially evident in legal proceedings concerning rape and adultery.

Violence against women persists as a pervasive issue, with domestic violence and honor killings prevalent. Despite legislative strides like the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2012, weak enforcement perpetuates abuses of women's rights. Furthermore, a poor criminal justice system, characterized by inefficiency and corruption, exacerbates impunity for perpetrators of gender-based violence.

Economic disenfranchisement further entrenches gender inequality, with low female labor force participation rates and limited access to property rights impeding women's financial autonomy. Educational barriers remain formidable, with gender disparities in enrollment rates and quality of education particularly acute in rural areas.

Healthcare access, especially concerning maternal and reproductive health, remains inadequate, contributing to high maternal mortality rates and limited reproductive autonomy for women. Cultural norms and societal attitudes reinforce these challenges, perpetuating gender stereotypes and curtailing women's agency.

Scholarly works emphasize the urgent need for holistic approaches to address women's rights in Pakistan. Legal reforms are imperative to eradicate discriminatory laws and fortify protections for women. Economic empowerment initiatives, such as vocational training and microfinance schemes, hold promise for enhancing women's financial independence.

Educational enhancements, including infrastructure improvements and curriculum reforms, are essential to fostering gender equality in education. Health interventions, such as expanding access to maternal healthcare services, are critical for addressing women's unique health needs.

However, numerous systemic obstacles, such as a lack of political will, visionless leadership, and rampant corruption, obstruct progress. Pakistan's fragile institutions and tainted democracy further impede substantive reform efforts. Patriarchal norms and poor traditional legislation persist, compounded by a dearth of legal reforms to counter systemic gender inequities.

In order to improve women's rights in Pakistan, it is critically necessary to remove structural hurdles, discriminatory practices, and cultural and patriarchal norms. The literature review underscores this crucial point. Pakistan can only achieve gender equality and enable women to actively engage in and make contributions to society by implementing extensive reforms, fortifying its institutions, and transforming society. Lastly, we need to enhance the judicial system, academic curricula, academic institutions, and educational media to ensure

effective enforcement of the legislation. The vast body of contemporary literature for women has to be developed in order to raise awareness of their rights.

### **Methodology**

A subjective methodology, which uses open-ended questions and detailed descriptions, is used to understand complex phenomena like women's rights in Pakistan. Techniques like interviews and focus groups are used to gather information about women's experiences and challenges. Qualitative data analysis helps identify recurring themes. A blended approach combines both subjective and quantitative research methods for a deeper understanding of women's perspectives.

### **Results and Discussion**

The paper delves into the intricacies of women's rights in Pakistan, highlighting the prevalence of gender-based violence, discriminatory laws, and violations of existing laws. It calls for comprehensive strategies like legal reforms, awareness campaigns, support services, and practical policies to ensure women's rights. The study also underscores the need for reforms in existing laws and modern education to promote gender equality. However, disparities persist, especially in rural and marginalized communities, necessitating targeted interventions.

Economic empowerment and political participation are crucial for women's rights in Pakistan. Initiatives promoting women's entrepreneurship, vocational training, and credit access have positive impacts. However, challenges like discriminatory laws, unequal access to resources, limited opportunities in the workforce, and a severe wage gap persist. Addressing these barriers and promoting women's economic participation is essential for sustainable development and gender equality. Addressing patriarchal attitudes, electoral violence, and limited resources for female candidates are also necessary.

The literature emphasizes the need for access to healthcare services, challenging gender stereotypes, and advocating for women's rights. This paper analyses obstacles and advancements in Pakistan for enhancing women's rights. Persistent efforts and cross-sector collaboration are necessary to achieve progress. Solutions include legal reforms, economic empowerment through vocational training and microfinance schemes, educational enhancement through improved infrastructure and gender-sensitive curriculum, and expanded access to maternal and reproductive healthcare services. Cultural change through awareness campaigns and community engagement is also crucial.

To advance women's rights in Pakistan, institutional strengthening, public-private partnerships, and grassroots movements are crucial. Addressing structural barriers, discriminatory practices, and cultural norms is essential. Comprehensive reforms, institutional strengthening, and societal transformation are necessary to ensure gender equality and empower women to fully participate in society. Public-private partnerships, grassroots movements, and international organizations can also be utilized.

### **Conclusion**

Pakistan's women's rights situation is complex and challenging, with persistent gender disparities and inequities. Women face disproportionate challenges in accessing education, healthcare, economic opportunities, and decision-making power. Community-level politics, patriarchal norms, limited resources, and violence and harassment also pose unique challenges.

Intersectional discrimination, including exploitation of women's inheritance rights and early marriages, persists.

Pakistan's journey towards women's rights necessitates the collective commitment and active engagement of all stakeholders, including the government, civil society, community leaders, and women, to move beyond gender-based discrimination and create an inclusive, equitable, and prosperous future for all citizens.

Persistent gender disparities severely impact Pakistan's women's rights, with the country ranking 152 out of 189 on the UNDP Gender Inequality Index. Women face low representation in decision-making positions, patriarchal norms, limited resources, and threats of violence and harassment. Localised challenges include unique hurdles in community-level politics, domestic violence, and exploitative conditions for home-based workers.

Religious, ethnic, and gender-based issues lead to discrimination, violence, and harassment against migrant women in Pakistan. There are many child marriages, which raises the possibility of psychological damage, maternal death, and domestic violence. A comprehensive strategy encompassing institutional strengthening, capacity building, legal changes, and community-level interventions is recommended to prevent gender-based violence. This strategy would empower women and address their particular issues in a variety of life areas.

Pakistan faces persistent challenges to women's rights and gender equality, including poverty, illiteracy, exploitation, discrimination, deprivation of legal rights, and cultural threats. Women often lack access to basic resources, healthcare, and educational opportunities, making them vulnerable to exploitation. The culture of discrimination against women in Pakistan manifests in unequal employment opportunities and limited participation in decision-making processes. Inadequate enforcement of laws and policies also deprives women of their legal rights. Cultural norms and traditions, rooted in patriarchal structures, continue to undermine women's autonomy and potential.

To address these complex challenges, a multi-pronged approach is necessary, involving the government, civil society, and international organizations. The way forward should include expanding access to quality education for girls and women, strengthening the enforcement of laws and policies that safeguard women's rights, empowering women economically through initiatives like the "Waseela-e-Haq" programme, challenging cultural norms and stereotypes through targeted awareness campaigns, increasing women's representation in decision-making processes, and collaborating with international organisations to secure sustained funding for women's empowerment initiatives.

By addressing these challenges and implementing a comprehensive, futuristic approach, Pakistan can make significant strides in advancing women's rights and fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and prosperous society. This transformation will benefit women and contribute to the overall development and progress of the nation.

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