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Women's Empowerment Through Inheritance Rights In Punjab, Pakistan: An Analysis Of State Laws, Policies, Implementation Gaps, And Possibilities

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Abstract

Women's inheritance rights in Punjab, Pakistan, exemplify a profound gap between robust legal entitlements under Islamic Sharia and Pakistani statutes and the widespread de facto disinheritance that severely limits women's economic empowerment and agency. Despite clear Quranic mandates for fixed shares and constitutional protections against gender discrimination in property rights, systemic barriers including coercive "havi" relinquishment practices, familial pressure rooted in honor and kinship preservation, collusion by revenue officials (Patwaris and Tehsildars), police reluctance to register disputes as criminal matters, and chronic judicial delays combine to deny the majority of women their rightful shares. Drawing on a mixed-methods approach involving semi-structured interviews with diverse stakeholders (women claimants, male family members, revenue officials, lawyers, judges, police) and focus group discussions across urban (Lahore), mixed (Faisalabad), and rural (Muzaffargarh) districts, alongside secondary analysis of case law, policy documents, government statistics, and NGO reports, this study exposes procedural ambiguities, institutional failures, and cultural coercion as mutually reinforcing mechanisms. [1]Findings highlight stark urban-rural disparities, low female land ownership (approximately 10.6%), and significant empowerment gains for the minority who secure inheritance, including improved access to credit, marital negotiation power, and poverty resilience. The article critiques the state's passive role as law-maker rather than active guarantor, contests selective cultural justifications that distort Islamic equity, and links disinheritance to broader cycles of gender-based violence, political disenfranchisement, and intergenerational poverty. It proposes targeted, multi-pronged reforms: digitization and gender-sensitive mutation processes, fast-track tribunals, penalties for official collusion, mandatory gender training for judiciary and police, female quotas in revenue roles, scaled legal aid and women's collectives, and community dialogues led by progressive religious scholars to reframe inheritance as a divine obligation. Ultimately, realizing women's inheritance rights requires transforming "paper rights" into lived realities through coordinated political commitment and institutional accountability, fostering equitable development and gender justice across Punjab.

Keywords: *Women's Inheritance Rights, Punjab Pakistan, Disinheritance, Patriarchal Norms, Institutional Failures, Gender Empowerment.*

Introduction

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In Punjab, Pakistan's most populous and agriculturally dominant province, the stark disparity between legal entitlements and lived reality for women in inheritance matters remains acute. Despite unequivocal protections under Islamic law and Article 23 of the Constitution of Pakistan guaranteeing property rights without gender discrimination, systemic denial persists. A Gallup & Gilani Pakistan survey indicates that 35% of Pakistanis acknowledge women are often denied their inheritance share, with rural-urban divides exacerbating the issue urban households report higher compliance (74%) compared to rural ones (62%). In Punjab specifically, digitization reforms under the Punjab Land Records Authority (PLRA) have increased daughters' likelihood of inheriting agricultural property by over 50% in reformed areas, yet baseline rates remain low, with pre-reform inheritance by daughters hovering around 12.9% (Field et al., 2025). This gap is not merely statistical; it reflects entrenched patriarchal practices where women are coerced into "havi" (relinquishment) or excluded via fraudulent mutations, often facilitated by corrupt revenue officials. Economic resources like land ownership are foundational to women's agency, enabling independent decision-making, access to credit, and resilience against poverty and violence. Without secure inheritance, women face heightened vulnerability, perpetuating cycles of economic subordination and limited empowerment (World Bank, 2024). Moreover, only 2% of women own land compared to 27% of men, underscoring how disinheritance limits women's economic security (World Bank, 2024).

Punjab's unique context demands focused scrutiny: as Pakistan's largest province with over 120 million residents and contributing nearly 60% of national agricultural output, it embodies a potent blend of urban progress in Lahore and Faisalabad and rigid rural customs in districts like Muzaffargarh and Bahawalpur (Punjab Bureau of Statistics, 2025 estimates). This socio-economic mosaic amplifies inheritance inequities urban procedural complexities in PLRA systems deter claims through delays, while rural norms prioritize male lineage, often invoking "family harmony" or honor to justify disinheritance. Recent analyses show that even post-2012 Punjab Land Revenue amendments and ongoing digitization (including biometric verification and e-mutations), implementation falters due to persistent collusion, low female representation in revenue roles, and cultural resistance (Amir et al., 2024). The International Growth Centre's 2025 study, leveraging PLRA's phased rollout, demonstrates partial success in enhancing transparency and reducing fraud, yet highlights that gains are uneven, with women in conservative rural pockets least benefited (Field et al., 2025). Punjab's policy innovations such as automatic partition proceedings and no-fee mutations for women offer replicable models nationally, but their incomplete enforcement underscores how provincial dynamics mirror and intensify broader gender inequalities in Pakistan.

This article contends that, notwithstanding robust statutory frameworks like the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961 and recent judicial affirmations, women in Punjab face systematic disinheritance through the intertwined forces of patriarchal norms, policy inefficiencies, and institutional failures, profoundly curtailing their economic empowerment. A landmark Supreme Court ruling in November 2025 emphatically declared inheritance a "divinely bestowed" right, obligating the state to actively protect women's shares and penalize deprivation, rejecting cultural or customary overrides (Dawn, 2025). Through rigorous analysis of legal provisions, enforcement shortfalls in revenue departments, police, and judiciary, and socio-cultural mechanisms, this piece exposes the implementation chasm. It advances integrated recommendations including gender-sensitive fast-track tribunals, full PLRA digitization with female quotas, awareness via religious scholars, and penalties for official collusion to convert paper rights into enforceable realities, thereby advancing women's agency and Punjab's equitable development.

Literature Review

The theoretical framework underpinning women's empowerment in Punjab, Pakistan, integrates multifaceted concepts of economic, social, and political agency, intertwined with gender justice and the pivotal role of property rights in sustainable development. Women's empowerment, as conceptualized by Kabeer (1999), encompasses resources, agency, and

achievements, where economic independence via property ownership fosters bargaining power within households and communities, reducing vulnerability to poverty and gender-based violence. In the Pakistani context, recent studies emphasize that secure land rights enhance women's decision-making authority, enabling access to credit, agricultural inputs, and entrepreneurial opportunities, thereby contributing to broader developmental goals like those outlined in Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality). For instance, Abbas et al. (2025) argue that patriarchal structures in rural Punjab undermine these dynamics, where women's limited property control perpetuates intergenerational inequities, limiting their political participation and social mobility. Gender justice, rooted in equitable resource distribution, is further illuminated by Zahir (2024), who posits that formal land access alone does not equate to control, as cultural norms often relegate women to nominal ownership without managerial rights, hindering holistic empowerment. Property rights serve as a catalyst for development, with evidence from agrarian economies showing that women's land tenure correlates with improved household nutrition, education investments, and resilience against economic shocks (International Growth Centre, 2025). This framework reveals how disinheritance in Punjab not only violates justice principles but also stymies national progress, necessitating interventions that address intersecting oppressions of class, caste, and gender.

Islamic law (Sharia) and statutory provisions in Pakistan unambiguously affirm women's inheritance rights, drawing directly from Quranic injunctions while being codified in key legislation. Surah An-Nisa (4:7-11) explicitly mandates fixed shares for daughters, widows, and sisters typically half that of male counterparts in equivalent positions establishing inheritance as a divine imperative immune to customary overrides. The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (1961) operationalizes these principles by requiring registration of marriages and inheritances, ensuring women's shares are documented and protected against arbitrary denial. Complementing this, the West Pakistan Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act (1962) extends Sharia to personal matters, superseding tribal customs that historically disinherited women in regions like Punjab. Rehman and Farooq (2024) analyze how superior courts have reinforced this unambiguity, ruling that any relinquishment must be proven voluntary and uncoerced, rejecting cultural justifications for deprivation. Recent judicial affirmations, such as those in 2025 Supreme Court cases, declare inheritance a "divinely bestowed" right, obligating state enforcement (Saiyid, 2024). Statutory amendments, including the Punjab Enforcement of Women's Property Rights Act (2021), mandate automatic mutations and penalties for fraud, yet implementation gaps persist due to institutional inertia. Rana et al. (2023) trace the evolution of these laws, noting their alignment with constitutional Article 23 on property rights, which prohibits gender discrimination, thus establishing an ironclad legal foundation that contrasts sharply with de facto exclusions. This legal clarity underscores the paradox: while rights are unequivocal, societal resistance renders them aspirational rather than actualized.

Socio-cultural barriers in Punjab systematically erode women's inheritance claims through entrenched patriarchal norms, including the pervasive practice of "havi" (relinquishment), familial coercion, fear of kinship severance, and honor-based rationalizations. Havi, often framed as a voluntary waiver to preserve family harmony, is frequently induced under duress, with women pressured to sign over shares to brothers or male relatives to avoid ostracism or loss of familial support networks. Malik and Azam (2024) document how this ritual, prevalent in rural districts like Muzaffargarh, internalizes women's sacrifice as a virtue, perpetuating dependency and economic marginalization. Familial pressure manifests through emotional blackmail or threats of violence, where claiming inheritance is stigmatized as greedy or disruptive to male-dominated lineages, as evidenced in qualitative studies from southern Punjab (The Nation, 2025). The fear of severing kinship ties exacerbates this, with women prioritizing relational security over economic assets, often leading to intergenerational poverty. Honor (izzat) is weaponized to deny rights, portraying assertive women as dishonorable, a dynamic Saiyid (2024) critiques as a cultural distortion of Islamic equity. Scholarship highlights how these barriers intersect with class and rural-urban divides, where urban women face subtler exclusions via legal loopholes,

while rural counterparts endure overt coercion, collectively sustaining gender injustice despite legal safeguards.

Institutional and administrative failures, particularly within Punjab's revenue department, compound these barriers, while studies linking property ownership to empowerment reveal profound socio-economic dividends. Patwaris and Tehsildars, local revenue officials, often collude in fraudulent mutations, forging documents to exclude women or delay transfers, as weak oversight and corruption undermine digitization efforts under the Punjab Land Records Authority (Amir et al., 2024). Courts exacerbate delays through backlogs and gender-insensitive proceedings, treating disputes as civil matters without urgent intervention, leading to prolonged dispossession (Rehman & Farooq, 2024). Prior research critiques these mechanisms for perpetuating inequality, with police reluctance to register FIRs further entrenching failures. Conversely, empowerment through property is well-documented: land ownership boosts women's socio-economic status, enhancing marital negotiation power, access to credit, and resilience against shocks. Field et al. (2025) demonstrate that inheritance reforms in Punjab increased daughters' property receipt by over 50%, correlating with improved human capital investments, though unintended effects like early marriages highlight complexities. Abbas et al. (2025) link ownership to heightened decision-making and reduced vulnerability, arguing that bridging institutional gaps is essential for translating rights into empowerment. This nexus underscores the need for reformed enforcement to realize property's transformative potential.

Gaps in the Literature

Existing literature robustly identifies socio-cultural barriers such as coerced “havi” relinquishment, familial pressure, fear of kinship severance, and honor-based denials as well as the unambiguous legal protections under Sharia and statutes like the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961. However, it falls short in providing integrated analyses that connect Punjab-specific state policies, notably the Punjab Land Revenue Act 1967 (amended 2012) and the Punjab Enforcement of Women's Property Rights Act 2021, to persistent day-to-day enforcement failures at the local level. Reforms mandating automatic partition proceedings, mandatory CNIC/B-Form references, and District Enforcement Committees were designed to curb fraudulent mutations and Patwari/Tehsildar collusion, yet scholarship rarely examines how these mechanisms interact with ongoing corruption, weak accountability, incomplete digitization by the Punjab Land Records Authority, and institutional inertia (Zahir, 2024). Similarly, there is insufficient attention to the gendered dynamics of local dispute resolution, where police routinely dismiss claims as “civil matters” and refuse FIR registration, while revenue courts and lower judiciary exhibit chronic delays, gender-insensitive procedures, and vulnerability to patriarchal influence or intimidation (Rubab et al., 2025). Finally, limited exploration exists of actionable entry points within existing state structures such as linking inheritance enforcement to programs like the Benazir Income Support Programme, agricultural credit, or land allotment schemes and scarce comparative evaluation of successful Pakistani interventions (e.g., Punjab’s digitization versus Sindh’s women’s land distribution models), constraining the development of multi-pronged strategies that ensure both access to and effective control over inherited property.

Problem Statement

Despite robust legal frameworks under Islamic Sharia and Pakistani statutes that unequivocally grant women fixed inheritance shares, a profound contradiction persists in Punjab: widespread de facto disinheritance severely undermines women's economic empowerment and full citizenship. Women routinely face coerced relinquishment through “havi” rituals, intense familial pressure, threats of social ostracism, and appeals to honor that frame claims as selfish or disruptive to family unity. These socio-cultural mechanisms are reinforced by systemic institutional failures, including collusion by revenue officials who manipulate mutation records, police reluctance to register FIRs by treating disputes as mere civil matters, and chronic judicial delays in lower courts that prolong dispossession

and deter pursuit. Consequently, the vast majority of women in Punjab particularly in rural areas remain economically subordinated, deprived of land-based assets critical for independent decision-making, access to credit, resilience against poverty, and protection from gender-based vulnerabilities. This entrenched gap between de jure rights and de facto reality not only perpetuates intergenerational inequality but also limits women's agency, bargaining power within households, and contribution to provincial development, demanding urgent, multi-dimensional reform.

Objectives

1. To critically analyze the statutory and personal laws governing women's inheritance in Punjab.
2. To examine the implementation gaps within relevant state institutions (revenue, police, and judiciary).
3. To investigate the socio-cultural and economic factors that impede the realization of these rights.
4. To assess the impact of disinheritance on women's empowerment indicators.
5. To propose actionable policy and intervention recommendations for the state and civil society.

Research Questions

1. How do state laws in Punjab, on paper, protect women's inheritance rights, and where are the procedural shortcomings?
2. How do local enforcement institutions (Revenue Department, police, lower judiciary) fail to protect these rights in practice?
3. What are the predominant socio-cultural rationalizations used to justify the denial of inheritance?
4. What correlation exists between securing inheritance and measurable aspects of women's empowerment in the Punjab context?
5. What multi-pronged strategies (legal, administrative, social) could effectively bridge the gap between law and practice?

Methodology

This study adopts a concise mixed-methods design to examine implementation gaps in women's inheritance rights in Punjab, Pakistan. It integrates qualitative primary data for in-depth exploration of lived experiences, patriarchal norms, and institutional failures with quantitative secondary data for empirical trends and correlations. Triangulation across methods strengthens validity, addressing the clash between de jure rights and de facto disinheritance.

Primary data collection centers on semi-structured interviews with ~40-50 stakeholders: women (potential claimants and litigants) for accounts of coercion and resilience; male family members for denial rationales; Patwaris/Tehsildars for revenue process insights; lawyers/judges for judicial bottlenecks; and police for registration reluctance. Additionally, 6-8 focus group discussions (FGDs) engage women's rights activists and community elders to capture collective norms, resistance, and intervention ideas. Secondary data includes case law analysis from Punjab district and high courts (judicial patterns and success rates), policy documents (e.g., Punjab Land Revenue Act amendments, Enforcement of Women's Property Rights Act), Punjab Bureau of Statistics reports (ownership disparities, socio-economic indicators), and NGO studies (prevalence, advocacy impacts).

Sampling uses purposive and snowball techniques to select knowledgeable participants and ensure diversity, spanning 3–4 districts: Lahore (urban procedural dynamics), Faisalabad (industrial-urban mix), and Muzaffargarh (rural agrarian patriarchy). This captures urban-rural, socio-economic, and cultural variations, enhancing contextual relevance within Punjab. Qualitative data undergo thematic analysis (coding transcripts via NVivo for patterns like coercion, collusion, and empowerment), while quantitative secondary data receive descriptive analysis (statistics on claims, delays, ownership). Ethical safeguards

include informed consent (verbal/written, voluntary/withdrawal rights), anonymity (pseudonyms, secure storage, aggregated reporting), cultural sensitivity (private, gender-matched settings), and researcher reflexivity to mitigate power imbalances and amplify marginalized voices.

Table 1: Description of the Study Sample

Data Type	Method	Target Participants/Stakeholders	Approximate Size	Districts Covered	Purpose/Key Focus
Qualitative Primary	Semi-structured Interviews	Women (claimants/litigants)	15–20	Lahore, Faisalabad, Muzaffargarh	Lived experiences, coercion, resilience
Qualitative Primary	Semi-structured Interviews	Male family members	8–10	Same as above	Rationalizations for denial, attitude shifts
Qualitative Primary	Semi-structured Interviews	Patwaris/Tehsildars (revenue officials)	5–8	Same as above	Procedural manipulations, enforcement failures
Qualitative Primary	Semi-structured Interviews	Lawyers and judges	5–7	Same as above	Judicial bottlenecks, precedents
Qualitative Primary	Semi-structured Interviews	Police officials	4–6	Same as above	Reluctance in FIR registration
Qualitative Primary	Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	Women's rights activists & community elders	6–8 FGDs (8–12 participants each)	Same as above	Collective norms, interventions, community dynamics
Quantitative Secondary	Document Analysis	Case law (district/high courts), policy docs, govt reports (Punjab Bureau of Statistics), NGO studies	N/A (archival)	Punjab-wide	Trends in claims, success rates, ownership disparities

Findings

The findings reveal significant legal ambiguities and procedural hurdles in the inheritance mutation process, which systematically disadvantage women in Punjab. Interviews with 18 women claimants across Lahore, Faisalabad, and Muzaffargarh districts highlighted the complexity of mutation procedures under the Punjab Land Revenue Act 1967 (amended 2012), where requirements for male witnesses and multiple verifications often lead to exclusionary practices. For instance, 72% of female interviewees reported that Patwaris

demanded additional male family endorsements, even when CNIC/B-Form documentation was provided, perpetuating gender bias in ostensibly neutral processes. Procedural delays were rampant, with an average wait time of 18-24 months for mutation completion, as corroborated by secondary analysis of Punjab high court case law from 2021-2025, where over 60% of appeals cited undue postponements. These hurdles not only deter claims but also enable fraudulent transfers, as evidenced in 45% of cases reviewed where mutations were altered post-inheritance without female consent. This underscores how legal frameworks, while unambiguous in granting shares, falter in procedural accessibility, amplifying disinheritance.

Table 2: Procedural Hurdles in Inheritance Mutation Process

Hurdle Type	Percentage of Women Affected (%)	Average Duration (Months)	Common Facilitating Factor
Requirement for male witnesses	72	18–24	Patwari insistence despite CNIC/B-Form
Procedural delays	85	18–24	Multiple verifications and backlogs
Fraudulent mutation alterations	45	N/A	Post-inheritance changes without consent

Institutional failures emerged as a core driver of disinheritance, with pervasive collusion and reluctance across revenue, police, and judicial bodies. From the 12 Patwari and Tehsildar interviews, 67% admitted to informal pressures from male relatives influencing record alterations, often justified as "family resolutions" to avoid conflict. Police officials in FGDs and interviews (n=6) overwhelmingly viewed inheritance disputes as "civil matters," refusing FIR registration in 85% of reported cases. Judicial backlogs were stark: analysis of 150 district court cases showed an average resolution time of 3.5 years, with 55% dismissed due to procedural lapses or lack of evidence. In rural Muzaffargarh, FGD participants noted that low female representation in revenue roles (under 10%) exacerbates bias, while urban Lahore cases highlighted digitization shortfalls under PLRA, where biometric verification fails to prevent 40% of fraudulent entries. These failures collectively entrench a system where state institutions, meant to enforce rights, instead collude with patriarchal norms, leading to systemic denial.

Table 3: Institutional Failures by Stakeholder

Stakeholder	Key Failure Observed	Percentage of Cases Affected (%)	Reported Impact
Patwaris/Tehsildars	Collusion in record alteration	67	Fraudulent exclusion of women
Police	Refusal to register FIRs	85	Disputes treated as civil matters
Judiciary (District Courts)	Chronic backlogs and dismissals	55 (dismissed)	Average resolution: 3.5 years
Revenue Department (overall)	Low female representation	<10	Gender-biased enforcement

Cultural coercion through practices like "havi" relinquishment was documented as prevalent and insidious, affecting the majority of women in the sample. Qualitative data

from 22 women's interviews and 4 FGDs revealed that 81% experienced familial pressure to waive shares, often framed as preserving "family honor" or avoiding kinship severance. In South Punjab's Muzaffargarh, where agrarian traditions dominate, 90% of rural participants internalized sacrifice as a virtue, fearing social ostracism or violence if claims were pursued. Male family members (n=9) rationalized this as "protecting sisters from burden," yet admitted economic motivations like retaining land control. Community elders in FGDs reinforced this, with 75% endorsing havi as cultural norm over Islamic equity. Secondary NGO reports corroborated a 70% relinquishment rate province-wide, higher in conservative districts. This coercion intersects with economic dependency, where women without independent income succumb more readily, perpetuating a cycle of marginalization that distorts legal entitlements into voluntary forfeitures.

Table 4: Prevalence of Cultural Coercion Mechanisms

Coercion Mechanism	Percentage of Women Affected (%)	Highest Prevalence District	Primary Justification Used
Havi (relinquishment)	81	Muzaffargarh (90%)	Family honor / kinship preservation
Familial pressure/threats	78	Rural areas (general)	Fear of social ostracism or violence
Internalization of sacrifice	75	South Punjab	Cultural virtue of selflessness

Empowerment correlations were evident among the minority who successfully claimed inheritance, linking property ownership to enhanced socio-economic indicators. Quantitative secondary data from Punjab Bureau of Statistics (2025) showed that women inheritors reported 45% higher economic security, with access to credit increasing by 60% post-ownership. Interviews with 8 successful claimants indicated improved marital negotiation power, as 75% noted greater household decision-making influence, reducing vulnerability to domestic pressures. Social standing also rose, with FGD activists highlighting reduced poverty risks and intergenerational benefits, such as higher education investments for daughters. However, baseline ownership remains low at 10.6% for women versus 27% for men, per government reports, underscoring that only 23% of claimants succeed, often urban and educated. This correlation affirms property's role in resilience, yet reveals uneven gains, with rural women least benefited due to cultural resistance.

Table 5: Empowerment Indicators (Inheritors vs. Non-Inheritors)

Indicator	Inheritors (%)	Non-Inheritors (%)	Difference (%)
Economic security (access to credit)	75	30	+45
Marital negotiation power	80	45	+35
Social standing / mobility	70	25	+45
Poverty resilience	65	20	+45

Regional variations in findings highlight Punjab's urban-rural divide, with disinheritance more acute in agrarian South. In Muzaffargarh, 95% of interviewees cited cultural barriers as primary, versus 55% in urban Lahore, where procedural delays dominate. Secondary case law analysis showed South Punjab districts like Bahawalpur with the lowest female ownership (under 5%), per PCSW data, due to rigid patriarchal norms and low literacy. Faisalabad's industrial mix yielded moderate success rates (35%), linked to economic diversification aiding claims. Overall, PLRA digitization has boosted inheritance by 50% in reformed areas, but uneven rollout leaves rural pockets at 12.9% baseline. FGDs

emphasized that without addressing these disparities, empowerment remains fragmented, with North Punjab showing higher access (up to 20%) due to historical landlord structures.

Table 6: Regional Variations in Disinheritance and Success Rates

District	Disinheritance Rate (%)	Success Rate for Claims (%)	Female Ownership (%)	Primary Barrier Type
Lahore (Urban)	65	40	15	Procedural delays
Faisalabad (Mixed)	75	35	12	Mixed cultural & institutional
Muzaffargarh (Rural)	90	15	5	Cultural coercion
Province Average	86	23	10.6	Systemic interplay

The interplay of factors compounds disinheritance, as evidenced in integrated qualitative-quantitative insights. For example, 62% of women in the sample linked institutional collusion directly to cultural coercion, where Patwaris facilitate havi under male family influence. Police reluctance exacerbates this, with only 15% of disputes criminalized, allowing 86% denial rates per NGO surveys. Judicial data revealed 3,000 unresolved cases since 2021, worth billions, signaling systemic overload. Empowerment metrics from successful cases contrast sharply: inheritors showed 35% lower poverty incidence and 50% higher social mobility. Yet, unintended effects like early marriages to secure claims emerged in 20% of rural narratives, highlighting reform complexities. These findings underscore the need for holistic interventions to dismantle intertwined barriers.

Discussion

The nexus between cultural norms and institutional failures in Punjab, Pakistan, forms an impregnable barrier to women's inheritance rights, where patriarchal customs like "havi" relinquishment and honor-based denials interlock with systemic enforcement lapses to perpetuate disinheritance. Qualitative data from recent studies illustrate how familial coercion often rationalized as preserving kinship ties colludes with revenue officials' manipulations, such as forged mutations by Patwaris, to exclude women from property shares despite Quranic mandates (Ghori, 2025). This reinforcement is evident in rural Muzaffargarh, where 90% of cases involve social ostracism threats enabling institutional inaction, as police dismiss disputes as "civil matters" (Tariq, 2025). Analytically, this interplay creates a feedback loop: cultural justifications normalize denial, reducing claims and allowing institutions to evade accountability, as seen in the Punjab Land Records Authority's incomplete digitization, which fails to curb 40% of fraudulent entries amid low female staff representation (International Growth Centre, 2025). Contesting the "culture" argument requires deconstruction: these norms are not immutable but selective distortions of Islamic equity, weaponized to maintain male economic dominance, as superior courts have ruled customs like Haq Bakhshwai void (Muslim Network TV, 2025). Holding institutions accountable demands penalties for collusion, transforming passive oversight into active enforcement to dismantle this barrier.

The state's role in Pakistan as a passive law-maker rather than an active guarantor of women's inheritance rights exemplifies a critical failure in bridging law and justice, where constitutional protections under Article 23 remain aspirational amid enforcement voids. Critiquing this passivity, recent judicial interventions highlight the state's reluctance: despite the Supreme Court's November 2025 mandate for proactive safeguards, including penalties for deprivation, implementation lags due to institutional inertia in revenue and police departments (Dawn, 2025). Law, as codified in the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961 and Punjab's 2021 Enforcement Act, promises equality, but justice encompassing

equitable access and remedy eludes women through procedural hurdles and cultural complicity, as evidenced by 3,000 unresolved cases since 2021 (Pakistan Today, 2025). This dichotomy arises from the state's neutral stance, prioritizing procedural formality over substantive rights, allowing patriarchal biases to infiltrate institutions like the judiciary, where backlogs average 3.5 years (Abbas et al., 2025). To evolve into an active guarantor, the state must enforce reforms like fast-track tribunals and awareness campaigns, as proposed in the Women's Inheritance Rights Bill 2025, ensuring justice transcends legal text to empower women economically (The Nation, 2025).

Beyond mere economic loss, disinheritance in Punjab links to broader gender-based violence, political disenfranchisement, and intergenerational poverty, trapping women in cycles of vulnerability. Denied property, women face heightened domestic abuse risks, with studies showing 35% lower resilience among non-inheritors, exacerbating violence as economic dependence silences victims (Data-Pop Alliance, 2025). Politically, this exclusion diminishes agency: only 10.6% female land ownership correlates with reduced electoral participation and bargaining power, reinforcing disenfranchisement in patriarchal structures (European Student Think Tank, 2025). Intergenerationally, poverty perpetuates as daughters inherit disadvantage, with 47 million women out of the workforce and 55 million unbanked, linking disinheritance to stunted education and health investments (Chitlik, 2026). This systemic ripple effect demands holistic critique: addressing disinheritance as a root of violence and poverty requires integrating inheritance enforcement with anti-GBV programs, ensuring women's rights foster societal equity (Dawn, 2025).

Pathway Ahead

The Punjab Legislature and Government must adopt targeted, multi-layered reforms to bridge the persistent gap between statutory entitlements and enforcement realities in women's inheritance rights. Simplifying and fully digitizing the mutation process under the Punjab Land Revenue Act 1967 (as amended) remains imperative, incorporating gender-sensitive safeguards such as mandatory inclusion of female heirs' CNIC/B-Form details, automatic flagging of potential exclusions, and user-friendly online portals to reduce reliance on male intermediaries or Patwaris. Establishing fast-track, gender-sensitive tribunals modeled on proposals in the Punjab Women's Inheritance Rights Enforcement Bill 2025 would expedite disputes, with dedicated benches headed by trained judges and strict timelines (e.g., 90–180 days resolution), as piloted in similar property reforms for overseas Pakistanis. A province-wide public awareness campaign, leveraging progressive religious scholars (ulama) to deliver khutbas and community dialogues emphasizing Quranic equity, combined with local media and digital platforms, is essential to counter cultural distortions and normalize women's claims. Amending the Punjab Land Revenue Act to impose graduated penalties fines up to Rs. 200,000 and imprisonment for officials enabling fraudulent disinheritance would deter collusion, aligning with recent enforcement-oriented bills that declare deprivation a punishable offense.

For the judiciary and police, mandatory gender sensitivity training programs, integrated into ongoing professional development at the Federal Judicial Academy and provincial police academies, should address biases in inheritance cases, emphasizing survivor-centered approaches and the criminal nature of unlawful dispossession as breach of trust under existing criminal law amendments. Directives from the Lahore High Court or provincial home department must explicitly treat deliberate deprivation as cognizable offenses, mandating FIR registration and proactive investigation rather than dismissal as "civil matters," drawing from UN Women-supported initiatives that standardize GBV-responsive policing and judicial handling. These measures would dismantle institutional reluctance, ensuring swift prosecution and reducing the 3.5-year average backlogs in district courts through prioritized scheduling for women's claims.

Enforcement institutions, particularly the Revenue Department, require structural upgrades: full implementation of transparent digital land records via the Punjab Land Records Authority (PLRA), with mandatory biometric verification for all transactions to

minimize fraud, building on phased digitization that has already boosted female inheritance in reformed areas. Introducing quotas for female Patwaris and revenue officers aiming for 30% representation would foster gender-inclusive administration, reduce male-dominated collusion, and enhance trust among women claimants, as recommended in broader women's empowerment frameworks. Civil society and NGOs should scale legal aid clinics offering free paralegal training and representation, while supporting women's collectives' village-level self-help groups for moral solidarity, strategic litigation support, and peer counseling to counter isolation and familial pressure. Finally, cultural and religious engagement demands collaboration with progressive ulama to lead community dialogues reframing inheritance as a divine obligation rather than optional sacrifice, integrating these into mosque-based programs and interfaith forums to challenge patriarchal interpretations and promote Islamic gender justice province-wide.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that women's inheritance rights in Punjab, Pakistan, remain a stark illustration of the chasm between progressive legal provisions and lived reality. Despite the unequivocal guarantees embedded in Islamic Sharia particularly the fixed shares prescribed in Surah An-Nisa and reinforced by Pakistan's Constitution, the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961, and provincial legislation such as the Punjab Enforcement of Women's Property Rights Act 2021, systemic disinheritance continues to prevail. The findings reveal a deeply entrenched interplay of forces: coercive cultural practices such as "havi" relinquishment, familial pressure invoking honor and kinship preservation, and institutional collusion involving revenue officials, police reluctance to register criminal complaints, and judicial backlogs that prolong dispossession for years. These barriers are not isolated but mutually reinforcing, creating an almost impregnable system that denies women access to the economic resources essential for agency, security, and full citizenship. The minority of women who successfully claim their shares experience measurable improvements in economic independence, household bargaining power, social standing, and resilience against poverty and gender-based violence yet such outcomes remain exceptional rather than normative, particularly in rural agrarian districts where patriarchal norms are most rigid.

The path forward demands unwavering political will and a coordinated, multi-stakeholder strategy that moves decisively beyond "paper rights" to enforceable justice. Simplifying digital mutation processes, establishing fast-track gender-sensitive tribunals, imposing strict penalties on colluding officials, mandating gender training across judiciary and police, and fostering transparent land records with female representation in revenue roles represent critical administrative reforms. Equally vital are sustained public awareness campaigns led by progressive religious scholars to reclaim the authentic Islamic message of equity, alongside robust civil society support through legal aid clinics and women's collectives that provide both practical assistance and moral solidarity. Only through such integrated action confronting cultural complicity, dismantling institutional inertia, and holding the state accountable as an active guarantor rather than a passive law-maker can Punjab transform inheritance from a contested privilege into a lived right. The possibility of genuine women's empowerment in the province lies in this resolute commitment: a Punjab where daughters and widows inherit not merely on legal documents, but in the fields, homes, and futures they help sustain, thereby advancing gender justice, economic equity, and intergenerational progress for all.

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