

Beyond Legislation: Uncovering Systemic Barriers, Hidden Biases, Institutional Failures, and Power Structures Undermining Women's Rights in Pakistan

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Abstract: *Despite constitutional guarantees and progressive legislative reforms, women in Pakistan remain entrenched in systemic oppression, perpetuated by patriarchal power structures, institutional inefficiencies, and deep-seated socio-cultural biases. While laws such as the Women's Protection Act, 2006, Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2010, the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act, 2011, the Anti-Honor Killing Laws (2016), and a series of family laws and restraining child marriages and prevention of other harmful practices against women and girls exist on paper, their implementation is severely undermined by inefficient formal justice system, presence of traditional patriarchal informal dispute resolution systems, bureaucratic inertia, and discriminatory societal norms. This study critically examines the gap between legal frameworks and their real-world application, revealing how institutional failures, judicial reluctance, and socio-religious conservatism collectively obstruct gender equality. Through qualitative analysis incorporating case studies, policy reviews, and expert interviews, this paper identifies key systemic barriers, including biased judicial interpretations, political apathy, economic marginalization, and media distortions that restrict women's access to justice, education, and employment. The research further exposes how power elites exploit legal ambiguities to reinforce patriarchal dominance, while institutional weaknesses in law enforcement, forensics, and healthcare disproportionately harm rural women. Practices such as watta satta (forced marriage exchanges), honor killings, and jirga rulings bypass formal legal systems, leaving women vulnerable to violence with little recourse. Additionally, religious and tribal customs often override statutory rights, creating an environment where legal protections remain illusory for many. Employing feminist legal theory and intersectional analysis, this study argues that sustainable progress demands more than legislative amendments it necessitates judicial accountability, media reform, and robust grassroots activism to dismantle entrenched power hierarchies. Ultimately, this paper calls for a multi-dimensional approach to women's rights in Pakistan, emphasizing systemic overhauls alongside cultural shifts to achieve meaningful equality.*

Keywords: *Women's Rights, Pakistan, Gender Inequality, Institutional Bias, Patriarchal Structures, Legal Discrimination, Honor Killings, Judicial Inefficiency, Socio-Cultural Barriers, Feminist Jurisprudence*

Introduction

Although a comprehensive legal framework has been developed in Pakistan that ensures women their rights, such as the Constitutional provisions, the Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act, 2011, the Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offense of Rape) Act, 2016, and the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2020 expected to become a law soon, the everyday life of the majority of women

is still dictated by institutional stagnation, systematic oppression, and patriarchy. Formal progress in legal reforms such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2010 and the Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences in the Name or Pretext of Honour) Act, 2016 are indicators of this legal progress, but this is hindered by the existent socio-cultural biases, the presence of informal justice systems, and resistance by the state institutions. In spite of such laws, women still have to struggle to attain education, medical care and legal redress to justice, particularly in the rural and tribal areas. The latest research demonstrates that most safeguards are performative, and legal actions are usually unavailable because of the fear of reprisals, the absence of enforcement capacity, and the power of patriarchal elites (Gondal, 2024; Yaqoob, Khursheed, & Ahmed, 2023). It is this inconsistency between the law and the culture that demonstrates the necessity to examine the underlying realities that continue to enforce gender inequity that extend beyond the legal realm.

The Pakistani experience of gender-oriented lawmaking depicts a trend of responsive lawmaking in the face of increasing domestic and international pressure, which is then followed by the failure of the implementation process. Preliminary laws like Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929, the Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act, 1939 and the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961 were initial steps towards legal empowerment of women especially in marriage, divorce and inheritance. Later, however, especially in the 1980s under the Islamization program of President General Zia-ul-Haq, there came regressive legislation, notably the Hudood Ordinance, 1979 that extremely limited the rights of women by equating rape with adultery unless four male witnesses were present. This ideological legacy of these laws has been partially reversed by the Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act, 2006, but it still influences the attitude of courts (Mohammed, 2023; Hussain, 2024). Recent legislation that has sought to focus on different contexts and changes such as online harassment and malpractices includes the Anti-Women Practices Act, 2011 and the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016. Nevertheless, empirical evidence still demonstrates that women, particularly in rural Pakistan, are still left to the mercy of jirgas and panchayats and the laws become ineffective facing the parallel informal systems (Talpur & Baloch, 2022).

In this paper, the author will argue that the ongoing problem of marginalization of women in Pakistan is not entirely comprehensible or solvable within a limited scope of law. The problem is not only connected to the absence of enforcement but to the institutional failures, the biases, and the power structure that in their entirety hinder the actualization of the rights of women. Such as, the Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2010 has established mechanisms of complaints and punishments, but it is hardly effective in the informal sector, where most of the working women in Pakistan are employed (Habib, 2024). In a similar vein, the domestic violence laws are most of the time not operationalized because of the absence of police training, social stigmatization, and the overall unwillingness of law enforcement to intervene in the so-called family affairs (Gul, 2023). Ambiguity of laws, bureaucracy and political indifference produce an institutional setting in which justice is not only delayed, but deliberately denied. Moreover, the Qanun-i-Shahadat Order, 1984 and its restriction of the evidentiary potency of female testimony in specific contexts is a representation of how patriarchal ideology continues to influence the legal thinking of judges (Saeed, 2025). These examples demonstrate that rights are frequently hindered not due to not having them, but because their realization is processed through the institutions conditioned by the patriarchal interests.

The reason to transcend legal frameworks is that the nature of gender-based oppression is intersectional and structural in nature. The legal reforms have to be embedded into a more comprehensive plan taking into account the social-political, cultural, and institutional frames in which it will be functioning. Law is not neutral in itself, as feminist legal scholars insist on pointing out, as it is the expression of power between the people in the society where it is developed and applied (Bibi & Qureshi, 2021). The fact that gender inequality remains a reality in Pakistan even after legal changes therefore indicates not only a loophole in the implementation process but also an institutional reluctance to change the existing order

of things. This can especially be seen in the way religious conservatism and tribal norms tend to override the rigid laws especially where there is a case of honour-based violence or forceful marriages like in the unofficial *watta satta* or honour killing practices. Thus, any effort to empower women's rights should entail a judicial reform, institutional restructure and a cultural change. In this paper, the multidimensional approach is adopted through the use of feminist legal theory and the intersectional analysis to identify the way deeply rooted systems of the judiciary, police, media, and local governance fail to respect the will of the legislature and continue to push the marginalization of women.

Problem Statement

Even with the constitutional provisions and a set of laws that are pro-women, discrimination and violence against women and their marginalization is rife in Pakistan. This contradiction unveils the fact that mere the presence of legal instruments is not enough. The issue is with the systemic, cultural and institutional pressures that come in the way of effective implementation and leads to patriarchal power relations, leaving formal legal protection largely symbolic to many Pakistani women.

Objectives

- To investigate the disjunction between women's legal rights and their experiences in Pakistan.
- To identify systemic, cultural, and institutional barriers impeding women's access to justice and equality.
- To analyze the role of prevailing informal justice systems and religious conservatism in undermining statutory protections.
- To propose a multi-dimensional framework for sustainable gender equity in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. What systemic and institutional failures obstruct the implementation of pro-women laws in Pakistan?
2. How do patriarchal norms and informal justice systems undermine statutory protections for women?
3. In what ways do media narratives and power structures sustain gender inequality?
4. How can feminist legal theory and intersectional approaches inform effective reform strategies?

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Legal Theory is the first pillar of our theoretical framework that challenges the belief in the idea that substantive justice is guaranteed by the fact that everyone is formally equal under the law. The argument presented by legal feminists is based on the fact that law is neither disinterested, nor objective because it represents the dominant gendered values and institutional biases (Bibi & Qureshi, 2021). In Pakistan, such notable laws as the Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act, 2006, the Protection Against Harassment at Workplace Act, 2010 and the Domestic Violence Laws are frequently hailed as hallmarks of development. However, feminist legal scholars demonstrate that legal changes often instill patriarchal values in the process and evidence rules, including the Qanun e Shahadat Order, 1984, which limits women to testify, or the ability of informal jirga systems to overrule statutory rights (Saeed, 2025). Feminist Legal Theory, therefore, allows us to look at how gendered power is pervasive in law itself in order to determine the results where legal victories of women are largely a paper exercise rather than a reality.

To complement this, the concept of Intersectionality, originally defined by Crenshaw (1989) explains the way in which women subordination is compounded by the intersecting identities of class, caste, rural location, and ethnicity and so on. The problem of gendered oppression in the Pakistani context is

not possible to decouple into socio-economic and ethnic disparities that discriminate women in their exposure to violence or lack of access to justice (Talpur & Baloch, 2022; Saddiq & Naveed, 2023). To give an example, rural Pashtun and Baloch women are subject to both the patriarchal tradition and the state disregard whereas urban working-class women can be exposed to either professional harassment or financial insecurity. Intersectionality as a concept contributes to our analysis by indicating to us that law and policy tend to benefit elite, urban, or educated women, so that reforms become insignificant to marginalized groups. It compels us to evaluate critically whose voices have been placed at the center, whose lives have been erased, and how hierarchies of power recreate inequity in the name of uniformity of the law.

Postcolonial Feminism enhances the framework through the revelation of the influence of colonial legacies and discourses of national identity on the Pakistani gender norms and policy strategies. The postcolonial feminists believe that most of the gendered laws and societal norms in Pakistan are a result of the colonial regime and its selective importation of Western models (Mohanty, 1988; Gondal, 2024). Even the most progressive reforms run the risk of concurring with the colonial reasoning in case they do not take into consideration local cultural specifics and power imbalances. As an example, the legal system of Family Courts, the Guardians and Wards Act, 1890 of the colonial period, or the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961 all carry the stamp of the colonial patriarchal legislative and administrative bias, which reproduces, in many cases, the gendered hierarchies instead of breaking them. Postcolonial Feminism focuses on the fact that insistence on legal changes without decolonizing legal mindsets runs the risk of contributing to certain manifestations of epistemic injustice and institutional abuse.

Lastly, Power Structure Theory as based on Bourdieu and Foucauldian approaches offers the means of studying the process of women marginalization through the use of symbolic, structural, and institutional power even in formal legal context. The idea of scattered power as depicted by Foucault through the agency of norms, knowledge, and bureaucratic procedures contributes to the understanding of the inefficiency of such law applications as the Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offense of Rape) Act, 2016 or the Anti-Women Practices Act, 2011: the mechanism of law enforcement, evidence collection, and judicial discretion is likely to reproduce the patriarchal power instead of breaking it (Gordon, 2018; Buckingham & Munir, 2025). The notion of symbolic capital advanced by Bourdieu also has a similar explanation of why the voices of women are not as legitimate in the judiciary, the police, the religious authority, and the tribal hierarchies in which men are dominant. Collectively, these theories highlight the ways in which power is not only entrenched in gaps within the statutes, but in the actual processes of governing, the interpretation of the law, and the social legitimation of practices which explain why legislation is not a sufficient strategy to uproot long-standing practices of gendered domination.

Methodology Research Design

The research design used in this study is based on qualitative research methodology that is premised on critical feminist inquiry with a particular relevance to interpret the lived realities of the marginalized women within the intricate socio-legal framework. The feminist studies critique the positivist concept of objectivity and focus on lived experience, emotion and power as valid and critical aspects of inquiry. A critically feminist approach allows the researcher to question the reproduction and legitimation of gendered power relations in the legal, political, and cultural institution in Pakistan. It also enables the reflexivity in the recognition of the role of positionality and subjectivities of researchers in interpreting data. Considering the intersectional and institutionalized nature of women marginalization, such methodology is depth-oriented rather than breadth-oriented in an attempt to infer the systemic patterns and contextual specifics that are lost when using quantitative measures of the same.

Data Collection

Data was collected through three complementary methods, each offering unique insight into gap between legal reforms and their implementation:

1. Policy and Legal Document Analysis:

A purposive review was conducted of major legislative texts, including the Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act, 2006, the Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences in the Name or Pretext of Honour) Act, 2016, the Domestic Violence Laws, and the Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2010, among others. These documents were analyzed for discursive framing, legal definitions, enforcement provisions, and the presence (or absence) of gender-sensitive language. This step provided a foundation for understanding the formal articulation of women's rights within the Pakistani legal system.

2. Case Studies:

Selected real-life cases were used to examine how laws are applied or ignored in practice. Cases involved survivors of domestic violence, honor crimes, workplace harassment, and forced marriages, with particular attention to how legal redress was either facilitated or obstructed. These cases were identified through Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) reports, court archives, and media sources. They provided tangible illustrations of systemic and institutional failures.

3. Semi-Structured Interviews:

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with legal professionals, women's rights activists, NGO practitioners, and female survivors of gender-based violence. Interviews explored perceptions of law enforcement, judicial responsiveness, informal justice systems (e.g., jirgas), and institutional barriers. The format allowed flexibility to pursue emergent themes while maintaining focus on research objectives. Participants were selected using snowball sampling to ensure both expert insight and lived experience perspectives were captured.

Data Analysis

Thematic coding was used to code data and a combination of NVivo software and manual methods were used to find patterns of recurring responses, silences, contradictions and power-infused accounts in the data. The theoretical framework of the study which included Feminist Legal Theory, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Feminism and Power Structure Theory guided analytical themes. The focus was on the ways in which legal texts and narratives of the interviews were revealing of gendered assumptions and institutional biases, the disjuncture between rights-in-theory and rights-in-practice. Reflexive memos were also applied during the coding process, where they helped to record analytic decisions, and guarantee theoretical consistency. Such a multilayered, interpretive approach was crucial in uncovering the hidden processes by which women are deprived of protection afforded to them by the law in reality.

Discussion Legal Framework vs. Implementation Gap

Despite Pakistan having passed a vast set of laws to protect women such as the Protection of Women (Criminal Laws Amendment) Act, 2006, the Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offense of Rape) Act 2016, the Anti-Women Practices Act, 2011 and the Domestic Violence Laws there is still a severe disparity between law and reality. As scholars record, laws often fail to be implemented when enforced in a disintegrated way, when they are complex in bureaucracy and when there is no political will (Aftab Ahmad & Bhatti, 2023; FMG, 2023). In one example, even though honour killing was criminalized, most perpetrators are still able to escape legal charges due to the supposed tribal notions of forgiveness and convictions are uncommon particularly in rural areas (Reuters, 2025). This enables the existence of detrimental traditional customs even when a legal framework appears to be progressive. The breach is

supported by the inertia of institutions as well as the prioritization of patriarchal systems in police, judiciary, and executive bodies, proving that legal language cannot change entrenched gender hierarchies that exist on their own.

Patriarchal Power and Informal Justice Systems

The jirgas and panchayats, which are alternative to the formal justice systems, continue to undermine statutory law by the enforcement of traditional norms, such as Vani, Swara, Watta Satta, and Karo-Kari, which threaten the autonomy and independence of women (RSIL, 2022). Focusing on the issue of systemic injustice, it is clear that the formal elimination of such practices that were deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 2019 is not enough to remove their local legitimacy (RSIL, 2022; Anwer, 2021). This dynamic can be well demonstrated by the case of a viral killing in Balochistan in 2025 after a jirga sanctioned the killing, and it took the international outcry to spur the state into action (Reuters, 2025). Such practices maintain male dominance over the bodies of women, their marriages, lives, and as such, the patriarchal powers that legislative tools find hard to overturn. Studies also indicate that marginalized women especially in the tribal or rural setting are left without any effective means other than to submit to such informal decrees (Talpur & Baloch, 2022).

Judicial Bias and Bureaucratic Inertia

Patriarchal approaches ensconced in tradition and bureaucratic, judicial systems are the major barriers to the implementation of women rights. With more and more women judges particularly in the family courts, though, the bias in the system is still rampant. According to a recent policy brief, more women are getting represented, but such representatives may regularly face institutional resistance and have no power to transform masculine culture in legal institutions (Accountability Lab, 2024). In the meantime, critical research acknowledges the problematic practice of the police, who slow the pace of investigation, ignore the statements of the victims, and misidentify the cases to prevent some political or social retaliation (Talpur & Baloch, 2022; Saeed, 2025). Women are also hindered in gaining access to justice due to bureaucratic procedural complexity like the elaborate legal thresholds in the case of honour-crime or strict evidentiary pre-requisites of the Qanun i Shahadat Order. The patterns used will demonstrate not only capacity gaps but also overall unwillingness to implement gender-sensitive legal protection.

Media's Role in Reinforcing or Challenging Gender Norms

Media in Pakistan occupies a paradoxical position in the struggle for gender justice: it both reflects and shapes the dominant power structures surrounding women's rights. While platforms like the Aurat March have gained visibility, media narratives often swing between empowering portrayals of women and regressive, moralizing critiques that delegitimize feminist activism (Aslam, 2025; Batool, 2025). Documentaries by figures such as Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy have proven the transformative potential of storytelling helping bring about legislative reforms like the Anti-Honour Killing Bill by stirring public empathy and pressuring policymakers (New Yorker, 2018). Yet, the very act of public exposure can retraumatize survivors, particularly in conservative societies where honour-based stigma runs deep. During the #MeToo movement in Pakistan, many women who bravely spoke out were met with threats of defamation lawsuits, social alienation, and character assassination often amplified by sensationalist coverage (New Yorker, 2023). This highlights the media's double-edged nature: it can catalyze change or weaponize trauma. Thus, while media holds the capacity to challenge patriarchal norms and promote reform, it must also be critically examined for its complicity in reinforcing gendered power imbalances. For media to truly act as a force for justice, its practices must be more ethical, survivor-centered, and socially responsible.

Impact on Rural and Marginalized Women

Women in rural, ethnic minority and disadvantaged economic communities are doubly vulnerable when

it comes to receiving the protection of the law. Gender parity is very low in Pakistan, especially in the rural areas of Balochistan and southern Punjab (Djankov et al., 2023). According to field research, these women are overrepresented in such traditions as Vani and Bride-exchange, and have to deal with a series of obstacles, such as illiteracy, poverty, and geographical isolation (Talpur & Baloch, 2022; BMC Women Women Health Study, 2022). Marginalized women do not have resources to travel to legal courts, pay legal expenses, or opposed community penalty even when laws are present. Maternal and health outreach workers also attest to the fact that a lot of them endure violence in silence over fear of stigma and economic dependency. The legal changes are therefore in many cases futile to women who are in need the most.

Cultural Overrides and Religious Interpretations

The religious rhetoric and the conservative cultural explanations still work against the statutory provisions and in many cases, they support the weakening of women rights. The Hudood Ordinance, 1979 although amended by the Protection of Women Act, 2006 still dominates the way the judiciary and the society thinks about rape and morality. The working of Qisas and Diyat mechanisms, formal and informal adjudication, is reported by activists to prefer the male perpetrators under cultural clemency (Talpur & Baloch, 2022). Religious leaders tend to understand the laws that regulate *khula*, marriage, or adultery in a manner that cancels out the autonomy of women thus washing off the intentions of legislature (Mohammed, 2023). Landmark judgements such as the Federal Shariat Court decision in case *Sakeena Bibi V. Secretary Law, Government of Pakistan* redefines the custom of *Swara* as unconstitutional, the decision is not always followed locally. These trends demonstrate that cultural and religious understandings can trump the law and support gendered power over women and their bodies and lives, and lack of moderate and enlightened thinking across the judicial hierarchy.

Findings and Analysis

This section presents empirical insights drawn from case study analysis, policy review, applying the theoretical lenses outlined earlier. Three dominant themes emerged: (1) systemic implementation gaps in gender-related law enforcement; (2) normalization of cultural violence through informal justice systems; and (3) intersectional barriers disproportionately affecting marginalized women. These patterns collectively affirm that legal rights often remain abstract ideals for many Pakistani women, particularly those without social capital, urban access, or institutional support.

The only constant trend was that there was a sharp difference between reported and prosecuted cases of gender-based violence (GBV). In 2024, 32,617 GBV cases were registered in Pakistan. Out of the total registered cases, 26,753 including 20,720 kidnappings and abductions, 4,641 rapes, 225 honour killings, and 1,167 domestic violence cases were in Punjab, 3,397 including 258 rapes and 134 honour killings cases in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 1,781 cases including 243 rapes, 2,645 kidnappings, 134 honour killings and 375 domestic violence cases in Sindh, 398 including 21 rapes, 185 kidnappings, 32 honour killings and 160 domestic violence cases in Balochistan, and 220 cases including 176 rapes, 22 honour killings, and 22 cases of domestic violence cases in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT). While evaluating the response of Pakistan criminal justice system against the registered cases, the national conviction rate is 0.5% for rape, 0.1% for kidnapping and abduction and 1.3% for domestic violence cases (Niaz, 2025).

This gap can be attributed to several factors such as case backlog in courts, weak investigation, insufficient evidence, fear of backlash, concern of going through the formal litigation and social pressure. Another strong factor is the reluctance of police to register First Information Report (FIR) in GBV cases. In rural areas of Pakistan, the police officers tended to pressure the victims to reconcile instead of filing official complaints due to patriarchal norms, corruption, political involvement, and informal family and tribal arrangements (Farid, 2025; Mumtaz, et al, 2024; VoicePk, 2025). These results are in line with the Power Structure Theory, which holds that institutional organizations cater the needs of powerful actors which in most cases are men, tribal leadership, or religion leaders hence perpetuating

the established gender status quo.

The table 1 below is a sample of some case descriptions compiled through media reports, field research and NGO reports. These examples reveal a common theme, namely that the legislation is present, yet the enforcement channels are circumvented, stalled, or trumped by unofficial settlements.

Table 1: Cases Patterns

Case ID	Location	Incident	Legal Outcome	Barrier Identified
PUN-01	Southern Punjab	Domestic violence, repeated assaults	FIR filed; accused released within 48 hours	Police collusion; political protection
SINDH-04	Interior Sindh	Watta Satta forced marriage	No FIR; resolved by jirga	Informal justice override
KP-07	Rural KP	Sexual assault of minor	FIR registered; trial delayed over 2 years	Judicial backlog; intimidation of family
BALO-03	Balochistan	Honour killing	Jirga imposed fine; no state intervention	Cultural override of formal judiciary

Note. Data synthesized from media reports, NGO case files, and legal analyses (see References).

Such incidents clearly illustrate how women’s access to justice in Pakistan is regularly compromised by institutional failures and prevailing patriarchal norms that often outweigh legal protections. Research into women’s legal access highlights how socio-legal barriers such as police indifference, patriarchal societal attitudes, and fear of victim-blaming create a systemic denial of justice, especially in rural and marginalized communities (Saleem, 2022). Intersectionality Theory further explains that these obstacles intensify for women from tribal minorities, low-income backgrounds, or remote regions; these women face compounded marginalization due to overlapping identities (Jafri et al., 2022).

From the lens of Feminist Legal Theory, it becomes evident that legislative provisions often focus on formal equality enshrining the right to seek redress while failing to address substantive equality in practice. A major gap exists for women working in informal sectors, who typically lack access to institutional grievance mechanisms or official contracts and thus remain excluded from protections under the Workplace Harassment Act, 2010 (Haider & Khattak, 2017). Empirical studies indicate that many women in informal employment such as domestic or garment workers report harassment that goes unacknowledged, dismissed by employers as “misunderstanding,” or ignored by officials (Nawaz, 2022b). Finally, religious discourse and symbolic authority often serve as cultural overwrites that undermine constitutional rights. Studies document cases where women seeking divorce (*khula*) or protection from domestic violence face public shaming by local religious leaders, reinforcing social ostracism and deterring legal action (Gondal, 2024). Postcolonial feminist scholars argue that religious-nationalist discourses have reinforced colonial-era norms, transforming law into a terrain of cultural contestation rather than a safeguard for justice (Durrani, 2018).

Conclusion

The analysis of the rights of women in Pakistan demonstrates a significant gap between the legal changes that were progressive and their reality in implementation. Although many years of gender-sensitive laws have been passed in the country covering laws against domestic violence, workplace harassment and honour crimes, as well as statutes in support of marital and reproductive autonomy, these legal instruments do not always become reality in protecting the very women to whom they are addressed. The systematic obstacles that this paper has revealed show that it is not possible to push through the very strong patriarchal norms, institutional inertia and cultural resistance only by passing

laws. Informal justice systems like *jirgas* and *pancheyats* still prevail over the formal judicial system, particularly in the rural regions and bureaucratic inefficiencies and judicial prejudices also hinder the process of justice. These facts demonstrate a system of power that maintains the rule of men on every level, making the statutory guarantees effectively empty of meaning to most women, especially those who belong to marginalized groups.

The evidence supports the conclusion that to have any meaningful change of women rights in Pakistan; it needs something more than statutory changes, it needs a breaking of the cultural social, and institutional structures that perpetuate gendered inequality. This involves challenging the normative authority of religious rhetoric, putting money into the reformation of the police and courts, and louder voices of women who have to wade through these oppressive institutions every day. Intersectionality, feminist legal theory, and postcolonial critiques are all relevant to emphasize the need to consider the interaction of class, ethnicity, and geography with gender to determine how women experience the law. Going ahead, a comprehensive, rights-based response is required the kind that is community-based, culturally sensitive, and politically endorsed. The paper demands formal measures that would boost the agency of women in the courtroom as well as in the daily situations where they are accorded rights, denied rights, or challenge the rights.

Recommendations

1. Institutionalize gender-sensitivity training for police, judges, court staff, prosecutors, lawyers government officials, and bureaucrats to improve the enforcement and interpretation of women's rights laws.
2. Establish and strengthen independent monitoring bodies to audit the implementation of womenfocused laws and report annually on compliance gaps and institutional performance.
3. Integrate legal literacy programs into school, college and *madrassa* curricula, ensuring students are informed of women and girls women protection laws, legal rights and mechanisms of redress.
4. Improve the scattered and ineffective legal aid system and expand legal aid and protection services for rural and marginalized women, including mobile legal clinics, referrals, and shelter networks.
5. Proper regulation and monitoring of the informal dispute resolution systems and elimination and penalizing of informal dispute resolution mechanisms that tend to violate the human rights of women and girls and violate the women protection laws.
6. Engage religious scholars and leaders in developing gender-equitable interpretations of Islamic law that support statutory protections.
7. Ensure quota-based representation of women in law enforcement, judicial bodies, and community governance structures is properly implemented and improve chances and opportunities for women candidates to get selected on senior leadership roles in the justice sector institutions and other executive bodies of the state.
8. Leverage media and digital platforms to challenge harmful gender norms, highlight success stories, and foster public support for women's rights.

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