

# Can Laws Alone Protect Women in Pakistan?

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## Essay

In Pakistan, Noor Mukaddam's tragic story shocked the nation — a young woman brutally murdered despite the existence of laws meant to protect her. In rural Sindh, countless girls face domestic abuse, but families and local councils silence their complaints in the name of honor. Even in cities, women's legal complaints about harassment or assault frequently get delayed, leaving the abuser free. These incidents reveal a painful truth: laws alone cannot ensure protection for women.

This raises the central question: can laws alone protect women? The prevailing patriarchal societal norms override legal authority. Economic independence of women, fear of social stigma and weak enforcement of laws discourage victims to seek timely justice. All these factors reinforce the fact that women's protection is not a matter of laws alone. Though laws provide a framework for bringing social change regarding women protection, it requires stern positive measures beyond laws to protect women. This essay examines the arguments supported by examples showing why legislation alone is insufficient when it comes to women protection.

Before analyzing the reasons why laws cannot guarantee safety for women, it is necessary to discuss importance of laws as far as women protection is concerned. Legal protection of women in Pakistan is crucial to ensure safety, equality and justice in a society where patriarchy and social norms often marginalize them. Law recognizes women's fundamental rights and provide mechanism to address violence and harassment.

They also serve as a deterrent, signalling that abuse against women will not be tolerated. Furthermore, legal frameworks empower women to claim inheritance, workplace rights and personal freedom. Without such protection, women remain vulnerable to domestic violence, honor killings and other forms of exploitation. Hence, legal protection is foundational for social, economic and political empowerment of women in Pakistan.

Q To begin with, one of the arguments that laws alone cannot provide protection against women is the weak enforcement of laws that limits their effectiveness. Pakistan has enacted several laws to protect women such as the Protection Against

Harassment of women at the workplace Act (2010) and domestic violence acts. However, their effectiveness is limited by weak enforcement. Police often discourage women from filing FIRs or delay investigations, leaving women unprotected. For example, women in rural Sindh and Balochistan frequently face domestic violence but are discouraged from going to the police and often rely on local jirgas. This shows that laws alone cannot ensure safety without proper enforcement.

Furthermore, in Pakistan, society often values family honor more than the rights of women which severely limits the effectiveness of legal protection. Many families discourage women from reporting abuse because they fear that social stigma or damage to their protection. This cultural mindset allows perpetrators to act with impunity, even when laws exist to punish them. For instance, honor killings continue to occur in rural Sindh and Balochistan despite being criminalized in 2016. The notorious case of Bano Bibi's killing to protect family honor is one of them. These societal pressures show that laws alone cannot protect women.

In the same manner, tribal councils, jirgas and Panchayat continue to enforce traditions that directly undermine women's legal protection.

These informal bodies often operate parallel to the state justice system and prioritize tribal norms over constitutional rights. In Sindh and Balochistan, jirgas have ordered practices such as Vanis, Swara or forced marriages to settle disputes, despite these acts being illegal under Pakistani law.

Even when courts declare such practices unlawful, local communities often obey jirga rulings due to social pressure.

This dominance of informal justice system shows that unless the writ of the state is enforced, laws alone cannot protect women.

In addition to this, economic dependence of women is a major behind legal failure to protect women. Many women rely on male family members for food, shelter and security which discourages them from reporting abuse or seeking legal action. Many facing domestic violence often withdraw cases because they fear losing financial support from husbands or families. In several rural areas of Punjab and Sindh, women tolerate harassment at workplaces because they

fear losing their only source of income. Even though the 2010 Harassment Act exists, complaints are often not filed due to financial insecurity. Hence, without financial independence, legal rights remain theoretical.

Moreover, the slow judicial process in Pakistan continues to discourage women from seeking justice, despite the existence of protective laws. In recent years, courts have remained overburdened, causing long delays in cases related to domestic violence, rape or honor killings. Even high profile cases show this problem: although the Noor Muhammad case eventually resulted in conviction, it took sustained media pressure and prolonged court proceedings, while thousands of similar cases never reach a conclusion. These persistent delays demonstrate that when justice is slow, women lose trust in the legal system, proving that laws alone cannot protect women without timely judicial action.

Another major reason why laws alone cannot protect women in Pakistan is the lack of awareness about legal rights meant for their protection. A large number of women, especially in rural and low-literacy areas, do not know about laws

related to domestic violence, inheritance or legal aid. For instance, despite Islamic and constitutional guarantees, many women are unaware of their inheritance rights and are pressured to give up their share in favor of male relatives. Similarly, in rural areas of Sindh and Southern Punjab, underage marriages continue openly because parents do not know about the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act. These cases show that when women lack basic knowledge of their legal protection, laws remain ineffective on the ground.

In Pakistan, patriarchal social norms continue to weaken the authority of law and limit women's protection. Even today, many families discourage women from reporting abuse because speaking out is seen as dishonoring the household. Despite the existence of anti-harassment laws, women journalists and social media activists face online threats but often avoid legal complaints because patriarchal attitudes blame women for public visibility. Similarly, UN reports showed a spike in domestic violence complaints, but many women stayed silent due to family pressure.

These examples demonstrate that when patriarchal values dominate social behaviors, legal authority becomes secondary, and women remain unsafe despite protective laws.

Moreover, misinterpretation of religion in Pakistan is often used to justify practices that violate women's legal rights, weakening the impact of protective laws. Deeply ingrained cultural norms lead families and community leaders to claim that denying women their legal rights is required by religion, even when this is inaccurate. For instance, traditions such as chadar or purdah - where women are pressured to give up their inheritance rights - have been defended as religious practice, despite a Federal Shariat Court ruling in 2025, declaring that such customs have no basis in Islam. Similarly, honour killings continue in some regions with perpetrators claiming they are upholding religious or moral codes even though Islam does not sanction killing for honour. These examples show that distorted religious interpretations can override legal protections, leaving women vulnerable despite the existence of laws to safeguard their rights.

While it is true that social norms, patriarchy and cultural practices limit women's safety, it is equally important to recognize that laws themselves provide the foundation for protection and justice. Strong legal frameworks clearly define what constitutes harassment, domestic abuse and workplace violations, creating mechanism for accountability. For instance, the Criminal Law Act 2016 criminalized honor killings and sent a strong message against crime by convicting several offenders. Similarly, the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010 provides women a legal route to file complaints, thereby empowering them to challenge abuse. Therefore, while social change is necessary, laws are not powerless. They are tools that effectively deter abuse against women.

To effectively protect women in Pakistan, laws must be supported by strong enforcement, awareness and institutional measures. The government should establish gender focused police units and fast-track courts to ensure timely justice. Meanwhile, public awareness campaigns and gender education can empower women to claim their rights. Religious and community leaders should be engaged to challenge

harmful cultural practices, and media should promote positive narratives that reinforce legal protections. These combined measures would ensure that going beyond legal frameworks, social institutional mechanisms also play a pivotal role in truly protecting women across Pakistan.

In conclusion, while laws alone cannot fully protect women in Pakistan due to social, cultural and economic barriers, they remain essential foundations for justice and equality. True protection requires a holistic approach — strong enforcement, awareness, economic empowerment and societal reform. With sustained effort, Pakistan can move toward a society where women live free from fear and abuse. As William Shakespeare stated:

The web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together.

This reminds us that while challenges remain, positive change is possible and by weaving together law, social reform and education, we can ensure a safer and equitable future for women.