

## Socio-Cultural Context of Violence against Women in Pakistan

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### Abstract

Violence against women takes many forms and is spread throughout a woman's life cycle. Because of deep rooted cultural and traditional practices, women in Pakistan are the victims of both direct and indirect violence. The present study aimed to reflect the knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of society towards violence against women practices in the light of Pakistan's socio-cultural context. The data was drawn from four districts and in a household survey, 813 couples were interviewed. Strong influence of socio-cultural norms and traditions was found and issues pertaining to violence against women are considered as personal and private. The prevalent cultural practices and gender-based social norms and traditions perpetuate lower status of women in the family, community and society. Recommendations for social reform policy are given.

**Key Words:** Violence against Women; Social & Cultural Practices; Pakistan

### Introduction

Violence against women (VAW) is a universal reality existing in all societies regardless of income, class and culture. It would be difficult to find one woman, whom at one time or the other in her lifetime had not been afraid merely because she was a woman. Women who are particularly vulnerable to violence are those who live in extremely precarious conditions or who are discriminated against on the basis of race, language, ethnic group, culture, age, opinion, or in the name of religion. The World Health Organization (2000) estimates that at least one in every five women in the world is physically or sexually abused at some time in her life cycle. The violence against women incidents affects both the physical and psychological integrity of women. VAW has drastic consequences not only for victims but also for the society as a whole. In the recent years, a lot of research has been carried out documenting the impact of violence against women. The health impact of VAW on women can be as high as some of the leading causes of injury; consequences are especially serious in the area of reproductive health (Heise, Pitanguy and Germain, 1994; Krug, Etienne et al., 2002.). Studies estimating the socio-economic costs of VAW have documented the impact on earnings due to death and lost productivity, job loss, lost productivity of the abuser due to imprisonment, and loss of tax revenues due to death and incarceration (Araji, 2000; Fleming, 1999).

International research provides convincing evidence that violence against women is rooted in gender inequities and is both tolerated and sometimes even condoned by laws, institutions and community norms that discriminate against women and girls (Heise, Ellsberg and Gottemoeller, 1999). Violence against women is thus not only a manifestation of gender inequality, but often serves to enforce it. Men often use violence to punish perceived misbehaviors of gender roles, to show authority, and to save honor. Violence against women is often considered normal and justified by the broader society rather than a criminal act, and victims rather than perpetrators are often blamed and stigmatized. Violence against women, therefore, cannot be understood in isolation from the gender norms, social structures and roles that influence women's vulnerability to violence.

Violence against women is a serious problem across Pakistan and contributes to the low social indicators for women's development in the country. Pakistan ranked 123 on the Gender Equality Index (UNDP, 2013). According to UNICEF (2000) violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men. As Niaz (2003) says, "History of violence against women is tied to the history of women being viewed as property and a gender role assigned to be subservient to men", (p.36). Pakistani society is a true example of exhibiting this violence where there are deep rooted beliefs based on culture and traditions, norms and social institutions that legitimize and therefore perpetuate violence against women. In many areas, like in KPK, Baluchistan, rural Sindh and rural Punjab, women are viewed as 'personal property' which can be sold and purchased. For instance, in rural areas, girls and women continue to be traded to settle debts or conflicts (Shaheed, 1998). "Women's right to liberty in Pakistan is restricted in the name of modesty, protection and prevention of immoral activity all this is done in the name of social morality", (Jilani, 1998, p.143). This kind of behavior, apparently tending towards protection of women, finally results in form of oppression of even basic human rights of women.

Women in Pakistan face the threat of multiple forms of violence, including sexual violence by family members and strangers, domestic violence, being burned alive, having acid thrown on them, dowry related crimes, being

beaten and threatened honor killings and other customary practices. Forced and early marriages of young girls continue to occur and girls and women continue to be used to settle debts or conflicts. They are beaten up, raped, tortured or even killed at home; they have to face the constant threat of sexual harassment, sexual assaults, rape and gang-rape. In tribal areas, tribal leaders run tribal councils which are a parallel judicial system in Pakistan.

The number of women of all ages and backgrounds who are killed in the name of honor cannot be determined; majority of these cases are unreported and only in the rarest cases are perpetrators brought to justice. Many women in Pakistan live lives in accordance with socio-cultural traditions which actually control their bodies, decisions and lives. Undocumented and unreported killings in the name of honor are often supported by the indifference behavior of police. As Shah (1998) notes, "it is paradoxical that women who enjoy such a poor status in society and have no standing in family should become the focal point and a false and primitive concept of family honor, which they are expected to uphold at the expense of their inclinations and preference in matters of marriage" (p.5). Regressive social practices, entrenched deeply in tribal and feudal customs and traditions, coupled with a conservative interpretation of religious leaders, are the main hurdles in the way of women, demanding their rights.

Discrimination against women is more a societal problem than being legal, as it is deeply entrenched in the mindsets of people. Laws are not sufficient to protect women against centuries old traditions. This requires strong grassroots level efforts and holistic approach to bring positive change in the society. In the recent years, abduction/kidnapping of women comes out to be most violent practice followed by murder. The customary practices and custodial violence, torture, trafficking, child marriages, incest, sexual harassment etc. have been reported showing a rising trend. The three categories of suicide, murder and honor killing, which deprive a woman of her basic right to life, together constitute 32.82% or one third of the total incidents of violence against women (Aurat Foundation, 2011).

#### **Objectives of the Study**

- Understand the social and cultural factors supporting and reinforcing violence against women practices (VAW);
- Identify the role played by key actors in developing trends, behaviors and practices towards GBV.

#### **Research Methodology**

**Sample:** The target group comprised of 813 (1626 respondents) married couples residing in the study area. Four major cities (Faisalabad, Jacobabad, Dera Ismail Khan and Quetta) were randomly selected to represent the whole country. The age range of the sample was 18 to 72 years ( $M = 32.6$ ,  $SD = 1.7$ ). There were 18.7% females in the sample. The participants had diverse educational qualifications. Thirty-four percent of participants were illiterate, 11% had primary education (Grade 5), 27% had passed High School, 12% had earned a 2-year college degree, and 10% got a graduate degree. Participants with University degrees were 6%. It is clear that the sample was varied in terms of a number of factors, including sex, age, education and residential location.

**Research Tool:** Semi-Structured Household Questionnaire was developed for conducting the household survey. Further, to record the information about the demographic characteristics of the selected districts, ratio of honor crime etc. Basis Information Performa (BIP) was developed.

#### **Results & Conclusions**

##### **Expected Roles for Men & Women**

Majority of the respondents (82%) were of the view that the males were supposed to be bread winner, educated and robust whilst the females were expected as domesticated, compromising and caring. The finding suggests that it is not considered very desirable for females to get higher education and have careers whereas for males, education is considered very important to earn and look after the family. The data clearly reflects the stereotypical attitudes and behavior of society about the gender roles.

##### **Power of Man**

More than half of the respondents (56%) thought that the 'real man' is a bread winner whereas 26.5% respondents viewed 'man' as 'hegemonic man' giving orders and remaining always in a winning position. A small number (5.4%) of respondents belonging to the less developed areas of the country (D.I.Khan and Quetta) thought that getting more than one marriage is a real sign of 'masculinity'. However, majority (86%) of the respondents in principal agreed that violence against women/wife is not a symbol of 'masculinity'. But in reality, it is women's behavior which leads to take steps against them.

##### **Women Rights**

Most of the respondents (67%) believed that women have the basic equal human rights as men have, but, due to socio-cultural constraints women were not able to properly exercise their rights. The data shows that 67 percent

respondents accepted getting education as a universal human right of women whilst 56 percent thought that women have the right to access health facilities. The right to get divorce was accepted by only 5.4 percent respondents. This shows that a woman is thought to a commodity owned by men and she has to obey what is decided for her. The socio-cultural norms restrict the mobility of woman denying her basic rights.

#### **Gender Awareness**

The study found that majority (77.1%) of the respondents was not aware of the national or international laws/conventions regarding women. The highest well aware respondents were from Faisalabad (an urban city) followed. The respondents in Faisalabad (41.9%) compared to the other three districts had more awareness about the honor killing law (to kill couple if they get married by their own choice). The Government had recently passed a legislation declaring honor killing a crime.

#### **The Most Prevalent Gender based Violence Practices**

The most prevalent gender based violence (GBV) customary practices found in the sample districts were 'Early Marriages' (marriage before the legal age) and 'Watta Satta' (brother & sister getting married to another brother & sister) followed by honor killing and denial of property rights. The customary practice of early marriage was found at the highest in Jacobabad (remote rural district with high rates of illiteracy and poverty) whilst honor killing was highly reported in areas of Quetta (tribal areas with their own laws in accordance to their local norms and customs).

#### **Reasons for Prevalence of GBV Practices**

The main reasons identified by the respondents for the prevalence of GBV related customary practices were poverty and family disputes. Due to poverty, illiteracy and lack of awareness about basic human rights, the customary practices related to violence against are widespread and people are mostly afraid of challenging them. These customs are so deeply entrenched in the social fabric of the society that inspite of being in contrary to the basic human rights; they are prevalent in the society. The respondents were so ignorant that they thought of most of the customary practices as family disputes and strongly believed that these matters should be sorted out according to the local customs and traditions. Thus, the influence of the local communities, groups and families was also a prominent factor making it difficult to question the prevalent customary practices. Further, a strong stigma still inhibits women from discussing these issues and from seeking help if it is required.

#### **Attitude towards Incidence of Violence**

The general reaction of the effected family and the victim if any unfortunate incidence happens is to pay no heeds and try to forget it. The attitude of the community remains mostly sympathetic towards the victim and generally advises her to accept the incidence as the fortune by God. Although the attitude of family and community is caring and compassionate, but mostly the victims cuts off from the normal life and withdrew themselves from social events and gatherings. In Quetta, mostly women are thought to be cause of the incident and the attitude of the community members was more conventional, rigid and very little space was given to the victims.

#### **Change in Violence against Women related Customary Practices**

The study found optimistic approach of respondents in the existing situation regarding violence against women (VAW) crimes. Wide spread literacy and awareness among masses is tagged as the milestones for brining change in the prevalent customs and traditions. Although, the awareness through media and other sources are contributing towards brining change in the society, but there pace is slow. The conventional attitudes and behaviors of the people are major hindrance towards change. The society in general is reluctant to accept change.

#### **Role of Media**

More half of the respondents (63.1 %) were of the opinion that media was not playing its due role in portraying cases of gender based violence. The breaking news and stories regarding violence against cases were mostly sensational in nature and were not released to help the victim. The respondents identified TV as main sources of information. The respondents strongly believed that media can play effective role by telecasting awareness programs on the nature and control of violence against women practices.

#### **Religion and violence against women practices**

The data strongly denied any relation between religion (Islam) and the prevalent violence against women customary practices. Clarity was found across all the selected districts even no difference of opinion could be observed among the educated and uneducated respondents. This shows that although the respondents are clear in their views about violence against women practices but the influence of religious leaders and traditional customs is so enormous that they remain silent.

### Role of Stakeholder in developing trends, behaviors and practices towards violence against women practices

The participants identified Jirga (an assembly of male elders, usually tribal, who make decisions in accordance with the local norms and practices regarding any issues) as the most influential stakeholder. The decisions made by Jirga have to be accepted by everyone and in case of not accepting the decision the person or family has to leave the community. Thus, the decisions by Jirga are considered as Supreme order and their decisions usually uphold in violence against women cases. In Pakistan, Jirgas are not functional all over the country, but in the tribal areas like Quetta and D.I.Khan, Jirgas are working as parallel justice mechanisms and are most influential. Whereas in the urban cities like Faisalabad, honorable persons in the community play an effective role in cases of violence against women. The role of police was described by respondents as very limited in cases of violence against women cases. The FIRs were mostly not filed in the police stations as it brings dishonor and disrespect to the family and the matter is generally considered as private.

#### Trends and behavior related to Violence against Women by Gender

Table 1 reflects that the male and female respondents were different in terms of background behaviors and attitude towards customary gender practices. The chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) value on attitude towards GBV customary practices is 37.197. And the chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) value on background behavior is 7.048. Both the values are statistically significant at 0.001.

**Table 1**

**Difference between background behavior & VAW practices of both sexes**

	Background Behavior	Attitude towards GBV
Chi-Square	7.048	37.197
df	1	1
Sig.	.008	.000

Further, the female respondents have higher median value on factors background behavior (86.06) and attitude towards gender practices (232.91) as compared to male respondents having median values on factors background behavior (79.69) and attitude towards gender based violence practices. This shows that females are more conservative in their thoughts and customary practices related to violence against women.

**Table 2**

**Rank Mean and Median of both sexes**

Sex	N	Background Behavior		Attitude towards GBV	
		Median	Rank Mean	Median	Rank Mean
Male	647	79.69	392.93	234.36	411.83
Female	149	86.06	421.46	232.91	402.03

#### Urban- Rural Differences

In the urban areas, the respondents were more optimistic about change in the prevalent customs and traditions. The Table 3 indicates that the sample of rural and urban locale was also different in terms of background behaviors and attitude towards customary gender practices. The chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) value on background behaviors is 22.170 while the chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) value on attitude towards customary gender practices is 8.655. Both the values are statistically significant at 0.001.

**Table 3**

**Difference between background behavior & VAW practices on Locale basis**

	Background Behavior	Attitude towards GBV
Chi-Square	22.170	8.655
df	1	1
Sig.	.000	.003

Further, the urban respondents have higher median value on background behavior (81.97) and attitude towards gender based violence practices (235.34) as compared to rural respondents having median value on background behavior (80.18) and gender practices (233.33). It shows that the urban respondents are more traditional in their thoughts and violence against women.

**Table 4**  
**Rank Mean and Median on Locale Basis**

Locale	N	Background Behavior		Attitude towards GBV	
		Median	Rank Mean	Median	Rank Mean
Urban	388	81.97	432.36	235.34	447.59
Rural	425	80.18	383.85	233.33	369.95

## **Recommendations**

### **Social Services and Protection of Vulnerable Groups**

There is a need to expand the availability of crisis centers, safe houses and shelters, especially in rural areas. Further, hotlines by which victims of VAW can access assistance must be established and information about them should be disseminated widely.

### **Counseling Services for Perpetrators of VAW**

Counseling services for the perpetrators of VAW must be arranged to reach at the root cause of the problem.

### **Consultative Dialogues with Religious Scholars & Jirga Members**

There is a dire need to have dialogue with the religious scholars and Jirgas members on issues pertaining to the roles and responsibilities of both women and men in Islam in comparison with the real life situation, reasons of VAW and strategies for prevention.

### **Awareness Raising Campaigns**

Awareness campaigns should be designed to “shame” offenders and inform women of their right to be free from violence and of avail protective services such as shelter homes or hot line numbers etc. A popular campaign is needed that involves people at all levels – home, family, community, society, and the State – and simultaneously raises awareness and mobilizes women and men to act towards preventing violence against women crimes.

### **Economic Empowerment of Women**

A major factor underlying gender based violence against is women’s low economic and social status relative to men. Thus, enhancing economic security for women is an important strategy in preventing violence.

### **Role of Police**

Gender training should be made mandatory in the training of police officers including in service training. Women representation in the police force should be increased. Police stations should develop women friendly and adopt a rights based approach to issues like violence against women.

### **Education**

Gender sensitization regarding violence against women should become part of school and university curricula. Adolescent reproductive health programmes and life skills education programmes should necessarily include training for the prevention of VAW.

### **Collection of Sex-disaggregated Data**

The involvement of gender issues in policies and access to data broken down by sex and age are essential to apprehend and modify response to women’s particular needs. Access to data (social, legal, police, health) based on the sex of those involved is indispensable if a true picture of the situation is required.

### **Networking**

Establishing liaisons among various stakeholders like women’s groups, community, social institutions, judiciary, and police is essential to identify and prevent violence against women practices.

### **Future Research**

More research is needed to identify the causes, dynamics, and outcomes of violence against women, including media effects, and to understand how different forms of such violence vary in outcomes depending on cultural context.

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