

# GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN PAKISTAN: CAUSES AND REMEDIES

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**Abstract:** Pakistan is a constitutional republic founded in 1947. It has a complicated social structure, based on customary law instead of divine guidance. The intricate social design of Pakistan has created problems for women in every field of life. Women are considered the source of all evil and a burden on the shoulders of parents and other family members. In Pakistani culture, a woman faces tremendous challenges, particularly in tribal regions of the country, where the situation of women is grim in all walks of life. An attempt is made in this article to analyse the situation of women in Pakistan and provide some remedies for overcoming inequality, injustice, and discrimination.

**Keywords:** Inequality, Injustice, discrimination, customary compulsions and political inability.

Pakistan literally means ‘Land of Purity.’ It emerged as an independent nation on 14 August 1947 and still exists with almost half its population in chains: women currently form 48 per cent of Pakistan’s total population and face terrific challenges across society, be it in relation to job opportunities or marriage issues. While the average age at which a woman marries has increased from 17.9 years in 1951 to 20.8 years in 1981, still in 1996 and 1997, according to official statistics, women constituted only 7 per cent of total households. The share of women-headed households is less in rural areas as compared to urban areas.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, the role of women and her competence in social development was envisioned as early as 1944 by Muhammad Ali Jinnah:

No nation can rise to glory unless your women are side by side with you. We are the victims of evil customs. It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the house as prisoners. There is no sanction anywhere for the deplorable condition in which our women have to live. You should take your women along with you as comrades in every sphere of life.<sup>2</sup>

The Islamic, democratic country carved out by Jinnah asserted that women had claims to the same rights as other groups within the framework of a conventional

state. According to the Pakistani constitution, woman can play an eminent role in all walks of life and are to be treated equally. But the patriarchal elements of society have continued to place her on the margins.<sup>3</sup> Historically speaking, very few women have emerged within Pakistani society as frontrunners in public life, organising political or welfare activities. But in the struggle to create Pakistan out of more than five hundred princely states controlled directly or indirectly by the British, women were an important factor. In December 1938, a resolution was passed to form an All Indian Women's Subcommittee as part of the All India Muslim League.<sup>4</sup> Among the early leading women within this movement were Begum Shaista Ikramullah, who in 1946 was elected to the National Assembly,<sup>5</sup> and Begum Liaquat Ali Khan, founder-president of APWA, to which Fatima Jinnah and Begum Nazim-ud-Din were patrons.<sup>6</sup> In more recent times, women like Benazir Bhutto (first female Prime Minister of Pakistan), Fehmida Mirza (first female speaker of the National Assembly), Hina Rabbani Khar (first woman Foreign Minister) have risen to prominence.<sup>7</sup> But on the other hand, there are also women like Tehmina Durrani (victim of domestic violence),<sup>8</sup> Mukhtar Mai (victim of gang rape), and Malala Yousufzai (shot by Taliban forces while campaigning for girls' education).<sup>9</sup>

Pakistan was created under the banner of Islam. Although Islam is a religion that has liberated women from the clutches of inhuman activities across the globe, in modern Pakistan women face lifelong challenges. Despite the granting of rights to women, Pakistan has neglected women's rights as they appear in Qur'an and Sunnah.<sup>10</sup> The status of women in Pakistan is quite different from what is ordained by religious teachings or prescribed by Islamic law.<sup>11</sup> The condition of women in Pakistan is deplorable. Domestic violence against women is greater in tribal areas, where women are considered to be the slaves of their husbands and required to do everything legal (and illegal) to make them exultant. The value of a woman in tribal society is not more than an animal – sometimes even worse. Landlords take advantage of innocent girls who work for them, raping and later even killing them every year.<sup>12</sup> According to the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap (2012), "Pakistan ranked 134th out of 135 countries."<sup>13</sup> PTI Punjab General Secretary, Yasmin Rashid, has said: "The status of women is extremely underprivileged in Pakistan. More than 40% of the women in their country have to face domestic violence at least once in their lives." The health facilities provided for women are also poor.<sup>14</sup> Rashid further said, "Half a million children are out of school in Lahore and its surrounding areas and 0.35 million among them are girls." Low female literacy is a major cause of deprivation, with consequences for domestic violence and reduced involvement in political, economic, and social events. Female illiteracy bars women from achieving their rights and opportunities in the workplace. All such situations result in social

and economic dependence upon men, enforcing male supremacy in Pakistan.<sup>15</sup> Women cannot raise their voice against violence by men, whether perpetrated by their fathers, brothers, husbands, or other relatives. Women are not seen as profitable entities, but as useless and unnecessary liabilities with no role in society.<sup>16</sup> Pakistan, from its emergence until today, is controlled by feudal social structures which cause severe antipathy towards women. The famous proverb within this system, “Zan, Zar, Zameen” (Women, money and land), is a source of evil, showing utter disregard for women. Such terms are used to blame women in the event of any undesirable behaviour on the part of men. Violence, or the threat of violence, at home, in the fields, or in the street, is a daily reality for the vast majority of Pakistani women.<sup>17</sup> Pakistani women face honour killings, domestic violence, and status problems on a daily basis. The rest of this article is dedicated to examining some of the most pertinent issues.

### Honour Killings<sup>18</sup>

Called *karo-kari* in Sindh, *siyahkari* in Baluchistan, *kala-kali* in Punjab, and *tor-tora* in the tribal areas of northwest Pakistan,<sup>19</sup> honour killings refer to the murder of women for adultery. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 791 honour killings occurred in 2010, 675 in 2011, and 913 in 2012.<sup>20</sup> The fear of being accused of adultery, a punishable crime in Pakistan, is a factor which discourages women from revealing incidents of rape, which is a major issue for women in Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> The worst burden faced by women is the interpretation of The Hudood Ordinance (1979), which makes sex outside marriage a crime against the state, while also discriminating against women who may be subject to harsher punishments than men under this Ordinance. According to the Ordinance, a woman has to produce four adult male witness if subjected to rape (*zina biljabar*). If she fails to do so, she must face criminal prosecution, imprisonment, and potentially the charge of adultery. It is very difficult for female victims to produce four male witnesses, who must meet the following qualifications as envisaged in the Ordinance: be male Muslims; offer the five daily prayers regularly from childhood; be honest in their daily dealings; have never told a lie; and must have never eaten anything in a bazaar or other open place.<sup>22</sup>

A number of women have been indicted and put behind bars under this Hudood Ordinance.<sup>23</sup> To give a few examples:

- **Fehmida and Allah Bux:**

Fehmida, a middleclass woman, fell in love with Allah Bux, a married bus driver from a different community. She absconded with him and they married. They failed to register their marriage within the prescribed period, however, and so

both were charged with adultery (*zina*). While Allah Bux was sentenced to be stoned to death, Fehmida received 100 lashes under the Ordinance passed in 1981.<sup>24</sup>

- **Safia Bibi:**

Safia Bibi, an 18-years old, virtually blind girl was employed in her landlord's house as a domestic helper, where she was raped by both the landlord and his son. As a result, she became pregnant. Although her father registered a case of rape, the session judge acquitted both the landlord and his son of the crime as there was not enough evidence to prove rape under the Hudood Ordinance. Safia Bibi's self-confessed pregnancy, however, was used as evidence of adultery. She was sentenced to a public lashing (15 lashes), three years imprisonment, and a fine of Rs.1,000. It was only the timely action of Women's Action Forum Lahore and a presidential intervention that saved her life.<sup>25</sup>

## Haq Bakshish

Some castes, like Syeds, do not allow the loss of their property. They therefore adopt a customary practice that forces women to symbolically marry the Qur'an. Called *haq bakshish*, this practice prevents property share if a girl weds someone who is not a relative of her family. It is commonly practiced in Sindh and parts of Punjab, particularly by those who claim direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad. Syed families across the Indian sub-continent are reluctant to marry their girls to non-Syeds because they consider the latter low born.<sup>26</sup> Three women who were married to the Qur'an in this manner were identified by Aurat Foundation's partners in Sindh. Two sisters, for example, had been married to the Qur'an by their brother after their father's death in Jamshoro, Sindh. These women were living in virtual slavery, looking after their nephew's family and doing the household chores. However, many women visited these sisters for *taveez*, *istikhara*, *dua*, *wazifa*, etc.<sup>27</sup> Fathers, too, have married their daughters to the Qur'an in the same region because they could not find a husband who was equal to the family's status, adopting this policy in a bid to protect their estate from transfer to other families.<sup>28</sup>

## Forced Marriages

A heinous crime, forced marriages (*ghag*) are common in Pakistan. Such marriages are always done without spousal consent and with some level of pressure, both physical and emotional, including the threat of social and family boycott.<sup>29</sup> According to Sana Samad, 950 cases of forced marriage were reported

during the years 1999 to 2009, with evidence of further deterioration in recent years.<sup>30</sup>

### Compensation Marriages

Variouly known as *swara* (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), *sang-chatti* (Sindh), *ljai* or *khasaniye soor* (Baluchistan), or *vani* (Punjab), this type of marriage forces girls into arranged relationships as compensation for murder, to offset debts, or to settle other inter-tribal/family feuds.<sup>31</sup> Women and girls who are victims of this form of marriage are seen as enemy property and treated accordingly.<sup>32</sup> Government agencies, such as Panchayat, do not take age-bar into consideration; the age difference between the women and men engaged in this type of relationship varies from 10:30 to 14:40.<sup>33</sup>

### Exchange Marriages

In exchange marriages, known as *watta satta*, women have no right to refuse a marriage proposal. Settled by families, exchange marriages generally comprise the concurrent marriage of a brother-sister pair from two households. The formal marriage ceremony is solemnised in the house of the bridegroom, not that of the bride, as is more usual in the Muslim world. During the *nikkah* ceremony, the bride gives her consent through her brother or other relative, who acts as *wakil* (agent) to complete the ceremony.

*Pait likkhi* is another form of exchange marriage. It involves a mother promising their unborn daughter in marriage to a future spouse.<sup>34</sup> In Sindh province, it is known by *addo-baddo* and sees families agree to marry their young ones, both boys and girls, to each other's tribes without consent.<sup>35</sup>

### Selling of the Bride

In Pakistan brides are sold as commodities, particularly in the tribal provinces of Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This custom is known as *walwar*. Girls caught up in it lose their freedom, being considered a purchased commodity with right of utilisation. The bidder who pays the highest price gets the bride, without considering her age, all under the pretext of custom.<sup>36</sup>

### Mor and Tor

In the tribal areas of Pashtunistan, women are characterized as either mothers

(*mor*) or as ‘black’ (*tor*). In tribal culture, the colour black represents death, evil, and negativity, while white symbolises purity and goodness. A woman labelled as *tor* has a hard, dreary, helpless, and miserable life. Considered to be the face of all evil, she has no right to participate in Pukhtun institutions, including the Council of Elders (*jirga*), the village guest rooms (*hujra*), the war party (*lakhkar*), or the sectional clan chieftainship (*maliki*). A divorced women is believed to have lost her chastity and risks being labelled *tor*.<sup>37</sup> In Pashtun culture, her main role is to service her husband at any cost, in line with the famous proverb, “Husband is another name for God.”<sup>38</sup>

## Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is the most powerful mechanism by which families, society, and the state silence female voices of resistance in a patriarchal social order. All forms of violence, including physical and mental, murder, kidnap, trafficking, and forced prostitution, are perpetuated against women.<sup>39</sup> It is prevalent across all social classes, from abuse to hitting to killing. Approximately 80 per cent of women in Pakistan face domestic violence. From 1994 to 1998, 60 per cent of women died due to injuries sustained in this way, including 739 cases of burn victims in 1994 alone.<sup>40</sup> That one in three women are uneducated exacerbates this problem as it means they are ignorant of their rights. Moreover, the misinterpretation of religious guidance by some scholars and schools of thought puts women in further danger.<sup>41</sup>

In Pakistan women are always under surveillance by patriarchal forces. Any susceptible action leads to terrifying consequences. Acid throwings, for example, have become fashionable in Pakistan, often resulting from unsuccessful love activities that result in enmity and domestic ferocity.<sup>42</sup> Acid attacks take place within families, even within the home, as well as on streets, particularly in south Punjab.<sup>43</sup> More than 65 per cent of acid attack sufferers are women and girls.<sup>44</sup> A report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan claims that between 150 to 4,000 women annually face such attacks.

## Dowry

Dowry is an un-Islamic, unethical, and dreadful practice. Increasingly common in Pakistan’s urban areas, among both the educated and uneducated, it is a symbol of patriarchy.<sup>45</sup> For every parent, it is a sign of honour to provide their child with a huge dowry so that she will receive a better place in her husband’s house. Due to this social evil, poor parents in Pakistan fail to arrange marriages for their girls.<sup>46</sup>

The acrimonious reality is that thousands of women lose a chance at married life or are murdered by their husbands for their dowry.<sup>47</sup> This bewildering situation is not acknowledged.<sup>48</sup>

## **Pardah**

Pakistani women face discrimination from birth. In comparison to male children, they are disliked and considered a curse for their families. From birth a woman must adhere to a code of restrictions that hang like a yoke around her neck and from which she cannot escape. She can neither choose her bridegroom nor take autonomous decisions in life. In particular, she must observe pardah and dress up to cover all parts of her body. She has no right to leave her house without consent. Women exist among countless restrictions,<sup>49</sup> whereas men are born free to do any activity.<sup>50</sup>

## **Education and Employment**

In Pakistan gender inequality prevails in many fields, including education, health, and employment.<sup>51</sup> The educational backwardness of Pakistani women is very disturbing. People do not favour female education because it is the mindset of fathers to consider their female children a burden, prompting them to restrict their school attendance.<sup>52</sup> In Pakistan all sections of male society consider female education as being against religion, culture, and family norms.<sup>53</sup> Though it is obligatory for Muslims to teach their children without any distinction of gender,<sup>54</sup> in Pakistani society women are considered intellectually defunct. They are restricted from achieving higher education because a well-educated woman means a loss of respect for men.<sup>55</sup>

In Pakistan, the literacy rate of women is 43 per cent across urban areas, but as low as 18 per cent in rural areas.<sup>56</sup> One of the major reasons for low female literacy is a lack of educational facilities for girls, especially in rural areas, where female attendance is also low because the number of female teaching staff is less than half that of the male teachers.

The patriarchal nature of Pakistani society means the education of women is viewed as a waste of resources.<sup>57</sup> Another constraint against women's education is early marriage, which becomes an obstacle to continuing education. Due to security reasons, some parents are also not prepared to send their daughters to schools in order to avoid inter-tribal clashes and clashes with security forces, all of which further sabotage the education of girls, becoming a major obstacle for female empowerment.<sup>58</sup>

Education creates and provides opportunities for jobs and helps someone understand their rights and duties. Those who are highly qualified get better opportunities in both the public and private sectors. In Pakistani society, female education is at lower ebb and decreased activity outside the home a considerable problem.<sup>59</sup> In the cultural context of Pakistan, wage work for women is considered a threat to the male ego, resulting in the restriction of women to the household.<sup>60</sup> Men are portrayed as intelligent and hardworking, while women are seen as shrewd, a nuisance, and a domestic constraint. This gender discrimination results in increased levels of stress and decreased motivations to work. Harassment is commonly faced by working women, who are considered an easy target by male colleagues. Most women in Pakistan come out of their houses to earn money only at times of extreme need; they are vulnerable and open to harassment from colleagues and management, who might make inappropriate remarks, make fun of them, or in extreme cases harass them sexually.

Women earn less because they choose unchallenging jobs and spend more time at home.<sup>61</sup> The Pakistani government provides few jobs for women. The rate of unemployment among women is consistently higher than among men, both in rural and urban areas.<sup>62</sup>

## Poor Healthcare

These above factors directly and simultaneously influence health, being connected to malnutrition.<sup>63</sup> Bias in food distribution leads to nutritional deficiencies among female children, including deficiencies in protein, Vitamin-A, Vitamin-B, Vitamin-E, and iron. Around 41 to 54 per cent of lactating and expectant mothers have deficiencies, while almost 31 per cent of non-pregnant and non-lactating women have anemic deficiency.<sup>64</sup> The premature marriage of girls, excessive childbearing, lack of control over their own bodies, and a high level of illiteracy adversely affects women's health. Moreover, a lack of female service providers and the neglect of women's basic reproductive health intensifies women's disadvantaged health status.<sup>65</sup> Unskilled midwives attend women at home during childbirth, and family planning and reproductive health clinics are accessible to only 10 per cent of the population.<sup>66</sup>

Women in Pakistan are therefore victims of high maternal mortality rates, with only 29 per cent receiving care from trained gynecologists and attendants. Pakistani women face high risk deliveries attended by inexperienced women, with no sense of hygienic conditions. Moreover, Pakistani women constitute two thirds of psychiatric patients, which is the outcome gender discrimination and patriarchal control.<sup>67</sup> Also affecting women's health is their unfamiliarity with



labour laws governing rights, safety, and security in the work place. Women are forced to work under pitiable conditions in the informal sector, in agronomy and fisheries etc. In horticulture and agriculture women face the threat of harmful pesticides that may cause respiratory problems, tuberculosis, gastrointestinal infections, and increased risk of cancer. More than this, many surveys have concluded that women working in contaminated and cramped conditions like brick kilns face a high risk of lung infection, damaged eyesight, skin glitches, and melancholy.<sup>68</sup>

## Politics

Pakistani women are marginalised, their role in politics reduced to a minimum. Their omission from decision-making bodies at the local, provincial, and national levels does not help them prove their metal or promote their perspectives. Pakistan's patriarchal society has the upper hand in political affairs; government offices marginalise women at every step, creating gender inequality.<sup>69</sup> According to Lauren Streib, Pakistan ranks 158<sup>th</sup> in the world regarding the status of women in political affairs. Female representation stands at only 3 per cent in the National Assembly (7 out of 217 seats), 2.3 per cent in the Senate (2 out of 87 seats), and only 0.4 per cent in provincial assemblies (2 out of 483 seats). However, in local bodies female representation stands at 12.5 per cent in Punjab and 27.6 per cent in Baluchistan.

This general lack of representation is due to poor religious and modern education, with customary religious propaganda and modern patriarchal dominance pervading political parties, working against women and obscuring true and authentic religious knowledge. As political representatives, women are not getting a fair share of decision-making positions and do not find favour as electoral candidates on the pretext that they lack political skills. There is a failure in government structure that, coupled with patriarchal and feudalist mindsets, reinforces gender inequality.<sup>70</sup> Some political parties, like Pakistan People's Party, have marginalised women within its central Executive Committee, even while claiming to be a liberal political party.<sup>71</sup> In other political and religious parties, so-called 'women wings' have been established but have much reduced memberships. Through regional cultural discrepancies, many religious parties have unanimously decided to exclude women from election processes or from contesting as political members. In many districts, like Dir, Mardan, and Swabi, a ban has been imposed on women filling in nomination forms or even casting votes. Even more astonishingly, male members of families often take part and attend council sessions on behalf of women.<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusion

In almost all Asian countries, women face discrimination. But in Pakistan the situation is particularly alarming, with gender discrimination being the order of society, observed in tribal areas throughout the country. Moreover, all this is happening under a constitutionally elected government. While Islam teaches that two different sexes, with different biological and physical characteristics, will have varying fields of responsibilities, it rejects gender discrimination: both genders have equal rights and opportunities, which need to be safeguarded. Among the major causes of discrimination are the backwardness of some regions, which lack exposure to the outside world. In these areas most people lack religious knowledge, which leads to the privileging of pre-established cultural traits, while also resulting in divisions in society. These need to be addressed at any cost in order to combat inequality, discrimination, and injustice.

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