

Violence Against Women in Punjab: CEDAW Compliance and Persistent Gaps

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v4i1.1766>

Abstract

This article analyzes one crisis, the violence against women (VAW) in Punjab, Pakistan, in the context of the CEDAW compliance. Although legislative progress has achieved significant gains in 2016 (such as the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act 2016), the Anti-Rape Act 2020, and the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2018, the VAW crisis still has no structural solution because of three compounding failures: the continued refusal to meet the CEDAW commitment through decades of not withdrawing the reservations on the main articles; a disastrous lack of connection between law and practice indicated by the pathetically low rates of conviction; The article argues that bridging the justice gap requires systemic change rather than gradual modification that will involve legal intervention and complete institutional investment as well as change in the cultural paradigms that perpetuate gender-based violence in Punjab.

Keywords: Violence against women, CEDAW compliance, Gender-based violence, Patriarchy, Impunity, Domestic violence, Honor killing, Legal reform.

1. Introduction

1.1 A Survivor's Story: The Human Cost Behind the Numbers

In Lahore, the cultural and judicial capital of Punjab, a 28-year-old woman referred to here as Ayesha that spent three years absorbing blows before she finally walked into a police station in 2021. Her husband, a man with deep connections in the local community, had beaten her routinely since the second month of their marriage. When she arrived at the station, the duty officer told her it was a 'gharelu معاملہ' - a domestic matter and sent her home. She returned twice. On her third attempt, accompanied by a neighbor who knew a senior officer, an FIR was finally registered under Section 5 of the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act (PPWVA) 2016. The case dragged for over two years. Under sustained family pressure and facing a judiciary that offered neither expedient hearings nor gender-trained judges, Ayesha eventually withdrew the complaint. Her husband was never convicted.

Ayesha's case is not exceptional. It is the norm. The Punjab Police documented 1,074 domestic violence cases in its most recent annual compilation and those are only the cases that made it into the formal system in 2025. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) estimates that 70 to 90 percent of domestic violence incidents are never reported at all (HRCP, 2022). Scale that underreporting rate across the Punjab Police's full dataset of 24,514 cases spanning kidnapping, rape, gang rape, trafficking, honor killings, early-age marriage, and sexual assault, and what emerges is not a crisis in data it is a crisis of civilization, one in which approximately 85 women are violently attacked every single day in a single province of Pakistan (Sustainable

Social Development Organization, 2022).

1.2 Defining Violence Against Women: The CEDAW Standard

The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which Pakistan ratified on March 12, 1996, provides the authoritative international framework for understanding violence against women. CEDAW's General Recommendation No. 35 (GR 35), issued by the CEDAW Committee in 2017, updated and expanded the original GR 19 definition to encompass all acts that cause physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm to women, including threats, coercion, and arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private (CEDAW Committee, 2017). This definition is deliberately expansive: it covers intimate partner violence, rape by strangers, gang rape, trafficking for sexual and labor exploitation, forced early marriage, honor killing, and the systemic denial of economic independence through coercive control.

GR 35 further establishes that gender-based violence against women is a form of discrimination under Article 1 of CEDAW, not merely a criminal law matter and accordingly imposes positive obligations on state parties to prevent violence, protect survivors, prosecute perpetrators, and provide remedies, sometimes called the '4P framework' (CEDAW Committee, 2017). The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (DEVAW), adopted by the General Assembly in Resolution 48/104 of 1993, similarly defines VAW as encompassing physical, sexual, and psychological harm perpetrated in the family, the community, and by the state (United Nations General Assembly, 1993). Punjab's 24,514 documented cases represent violations of each of these frameworks, in every category, at scale.

1.3 Thesis Statement

This article argues that despite Punjab's significant legislative progress over the past decade including the PPWVA 2016, the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2020, and the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2018 the province's VAW crisis remains unresolved because of three compounding failures: first, Pakistan's persistent non-compliance with its CEDAW obligations, most visibly through its twenty-eight-year refusal to withdraw reservations on Articles 2, 9, 16, and 29; second, the catastrophic gap between legislation and enforcement, reflected in conviction rates below one percent for rape; and third, the entrenchment of patriarchal cultural norms that suppress reporting, enable impunity, and shelter practices including honor killing and forced early marriage from legal accountability. Closing this gap demands not incremental adjustment but structural transformation.

2. Historical and International Context

2.1 Pakistan's CEDAW Accession: Commitment with Caveats

In 1996, after nearly two decades of domestic movements advocating the rights of women, Pakistan became a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a move that was influenced chiefly by the efforts of organisations like Shirkat Gah and the Women Action forum who objected to regressive policies towards women, introduced by the General Zia ul-Haq programme of Islamization since 1979 (Ali, 2000). The Hudood Ordinances, which include the Offence of Zina (Enforcement of Hudood) Ordinance, the Offence of Qazf Ordinance, the Prohibition Order and the Execution of Punishment of Whipping Ordinance, essentially reshaped the criminal law in Pakistan on Sharia principles, making four male witnesses to convict rape, treating adultery and consensual sex out of marriage as equal offenses, and leaving the survivors of rape without male witnesses and to face charges on adultery (HRCP, 2022). Though the Women Protection Act of 2006 somewhat changed the framework of the Hudood system, by placing rape in the realm of the Pakistan Penal Code, the Zina Ordinance continues to affect policing and prosecution, resulting in such perceptions of rape survivors seeking justice.

It is against this backdrop that when Pakistan ratified CEDAW it was done with formal declarations that the

provisions of CEDAW would only be applied to the extent that it was not against the provisions of the Islamic shariah. This statement, which is in law a reservation in form, was directed to Articles 2 (obligation to eliminate discrimination), 9 (rights of nationality), 16 (equality in marriage and family), and 29 (settlement of disputes) (United Nations Treaty Collection, 1996). These reservations have always been described by the CEDAW Committee as being inconsistent with the object and purpose of the Convention and have been requested to be withdrawn in every periodic review of Pakistan since accession, including in 2019 (CEDAW Committee, 2019). The reservations are not withdrawn. Two hundred and eight honour killings and 111 early-age marriages in the Punjab annual data recorded over twenty-eight years have still been observed to be happening, in part due to the fact that these reservations indicate that the state does not consider the full legal equality of women in family relations as an obligation that has to be insisted upon.

2.2 CEDAW Concluding Observations (2013 -2024) and Compliance

In July 2019, the CEDAW Committee discussed the combined fourth and fifth periodic report of Pakistan and came up with Concluding Observations in document CEDAW/C/PAK/CO/4-5. The Committee findings amount to a thorough indictment of the compliance track record of Pakistan in all the substantive aspects of the Convention. In reforming the law, the Committee was highly concerned that marital rape continues to be decriminalised under Pakistani law, which stated that section 375 of the Pakistan Penal Code was explicit that sexual intercourse between a husband and a wife is not considered rape despite age or consent, in full contravention of Articles 2(f), 5(a), and 16(1)(c) of CEDAW (CEDAW Committee, 2019). Such exclusion implies that the 3,808 rape incidents and 1,253 gang-rape incidents reported in the GCB data are only the legally cognizable rapes; the whole marital rape category goes unreported by the formal justice system.

Regarding institutional support, the Committee condemned Pakistan not having an adequate number of shelters and one-stop crisis centers by its population of more than 220 million because the thirty-six Dar-ul-Aman shelters in Punjab, which serve a provincial population of about 110 million, are unreasonably low to address the needs of survivors (CEDAW Committee, 2019; Punjab Government, 2021). In data systems, the Committee also recommended that Pakistan develops comprehensive sex-disaggregated data-collection mechanisms to capture the entire range of violence against women incidences in all the provinces, as the lack of such mechanisms makes it structurally impossible to monitor treaty compliance (CEDAW Committee, 2019).

This trend of formal commitment and substantive failure is further supported by the adherence history of Pakistan on the other international human rights instruments. In 2017, the United Nations Human Rights Committee that reviewed the observance of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in Pakistan said that it is concerned with violence against women, lack of legal protection, and non-criminalization of marital rape (UN Human Rights Committee, 2017). In 2017, the United Nations Committee Against Torture (CAT) observed with alarm that women were reported to be subjected to violence by police when registering, that degrading examination habits were practiced and that detained women were abused (UN CAT, 2017). All of this cumulative evidence on the part of various treaty bodies is suggestive of the systematic institutional failure that no law has been able to solve.

3. Data Overview: The Statistical Anatomy of the Crisis

3.1 Key Statistics 2025: What the Numbers Reveal

Graphs below present the consolidated VAW dataset from Punjab Police obtained via RTI Act 2013 Punjab, which constitutes the primary quantitative evidence base for this analysis. The data represents formally registered cases only a critical limitation that will be addressed in Section 3.3.

3.2 Trend Analysis: Patterns, Concentrations, and Implications

The Punjab Police statistics show a crime environment that is characterized by the denial of freedom.

Kidnapping under the PPC Section 365 -b, which includes kidnapping to be forcibly married, trafficked, sexually exploited, and ransom, covers 15569 out of 24514 total cases, or 63.5% of the total dataset. This number needs especially interpretive caution: according to Pakistani jurists, the forced marriages covered by 365-B cases have been found to constitute a significant percentage, in which the women are free in their choice of a partner and are then reported missing to subsequent criminal charges, which are launched not to save the woman, but to penalize her and her spouse. Thus, the kidnapping group serves as an approximate measure of a variety of overlapping types of gender-based violence that are not appropriately disaggregated by the current data structures.

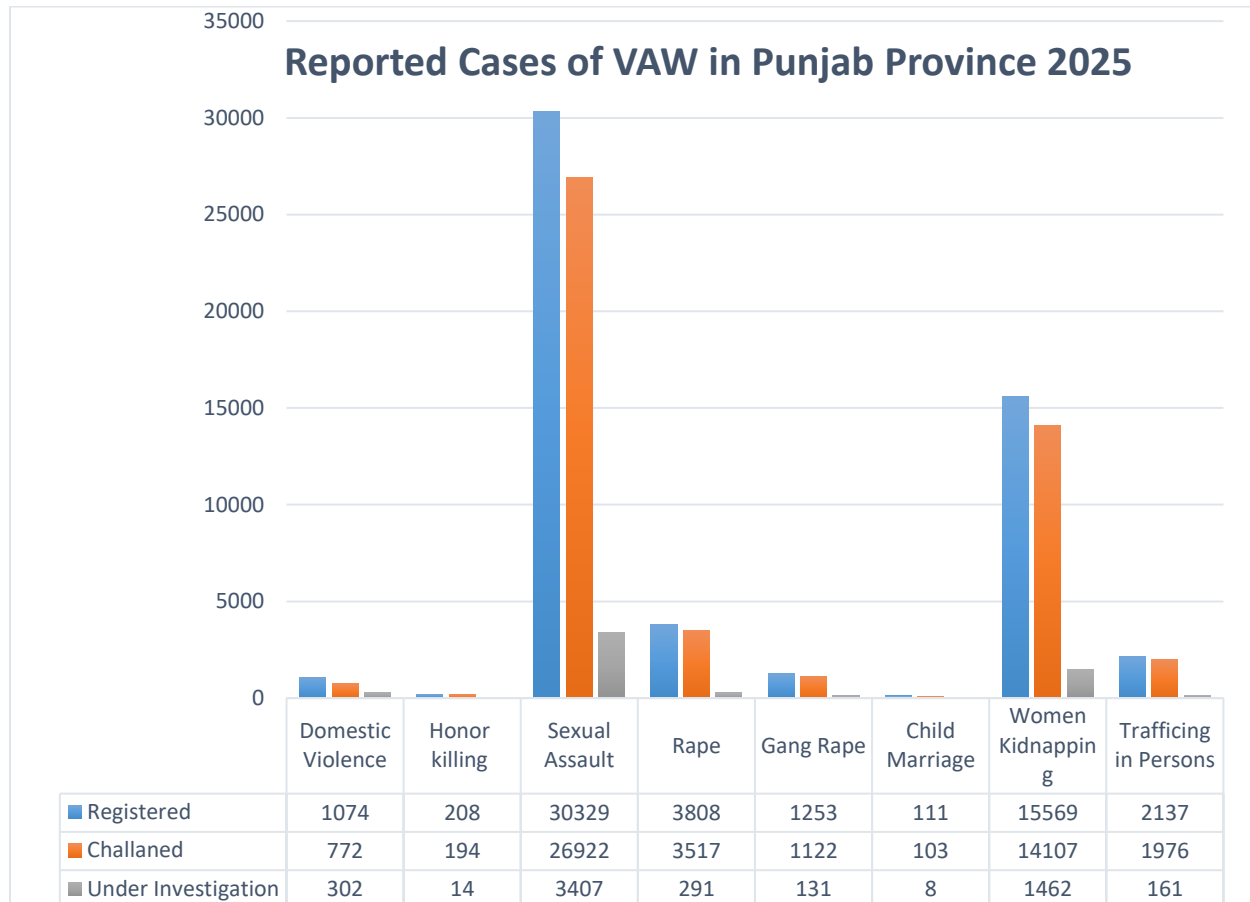


Figure 1: Data Obtained through RTI From AIG Monitoring / Punjab Police 2025

The second most widespread type is sexual violence: 3808 rape cases and 1253 gang-rape cases provide a total of 5061 cases or 13.8 cases per day. The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act of 2020, passed in the wake of high-profile gang-rape incidents, such as the October 2020 motorway incident that set the nation ablaze, established the 22 Anti-Rape Crisis Cells within major hospitals, introduced the use of DNA profiling protocols, set up a Sex Offenders Register and established Special Courts to expedite the trial (Government of Pakistan, 2020). Although the Police data show these institutional innovations, the number of cases of 5061 combined in one province in one year is an official report of the AIG Monitoring Punjab Police, and less than 50 cases are estimated to have been convicted (HRCP, 2022). This procedural framework of the Anti-Rape Act has therefore been structurally sabotaged by a lack of funding in the field of forensic infrastructure, the lack of trained female medical examiners and the unwillingness of the judicial system to handle specialized court protocols.

Pakistan has a traffic data of 2137 cases or 5.9 a day, which only reflects a part of the real traffic situation. The 2021 Global Trafficking Report released by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime listed Pakistan on a list of countries of origin, transit, and destination of trafficking women and girls, and internal trafficking of women and girls to do labor and sexual exploitation as the most dominant (UNODC, 2021). The Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2018 has provided an improvement on the penalties of up to 10 years imprisonment on trafficking crimes and has created the means of identification, referral, and repatriation of the victims; however, poor inter-agency coordination, lack of a centralized database of victims, and inadequate specialized shelters of trafficking victims has hampered its implementation (Government of Pakistan, 2018). The dataset is topped off with domestic violence (1074 cases), honor killings (208), and, finally, early-age marriage (111) - all, after all, related to one and the same underlying framework of patriarchal domination.

City-wise VAW Data Segregation:

In Pakistan, major urban centers such as Faisalabad (FSD), Lahore (LHR), Rawalpindi (RWP), Multan (MULT), and Gujranwala (GUJR) consistently report the highest incidences of violence against women (VAW), driven by factors like population density, weak enforcement of protective laws, and entrenched patriarchal norms. This city-wise breakdown underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions, including better policing and awareness campaigns, to address VAW in these high-risk hotspots, while noting that the high reporting ratio in these cities is also attributable to greater awareness and access to reporting mechanisms compared to rural areas.

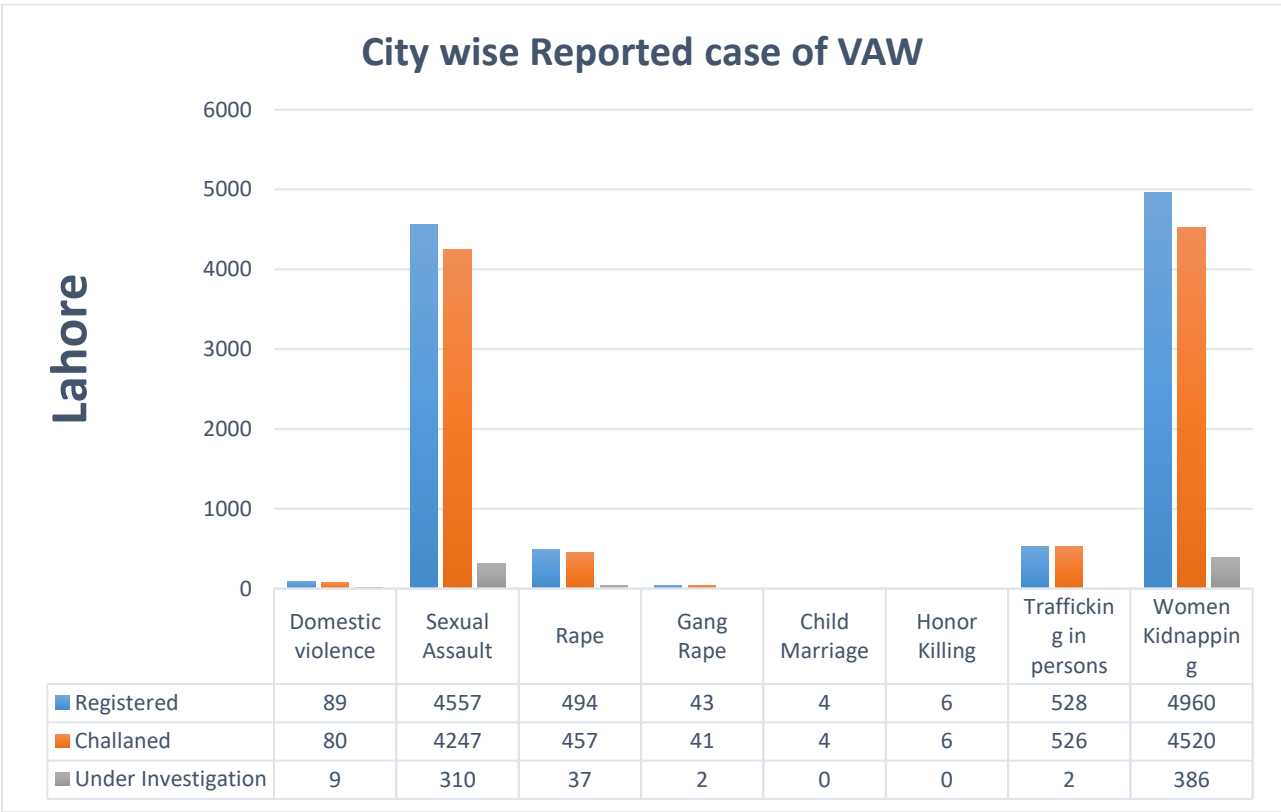


Figure 2 Data obtained through RTI from AIG monitoring / Punjab police 2025

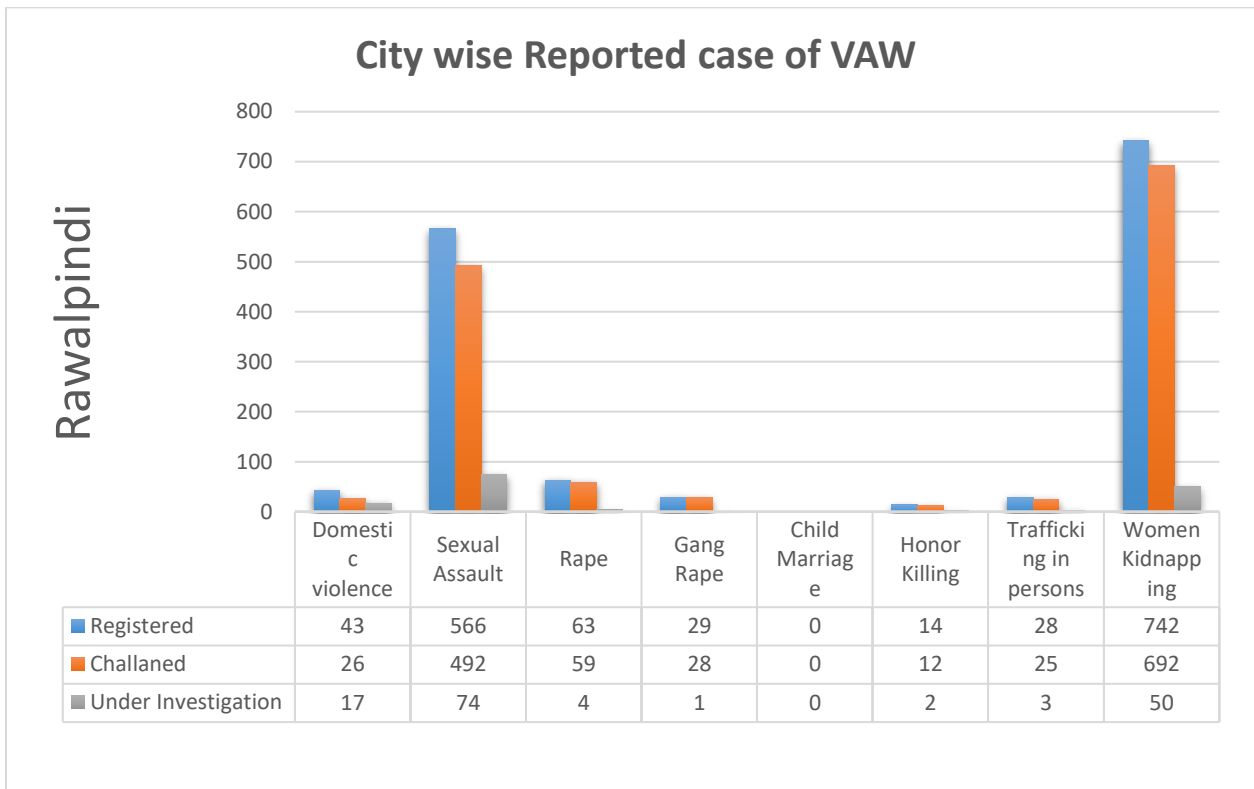


Figure 3 Data obtained through RTI from AIG monitoring / Punjab Police 2025

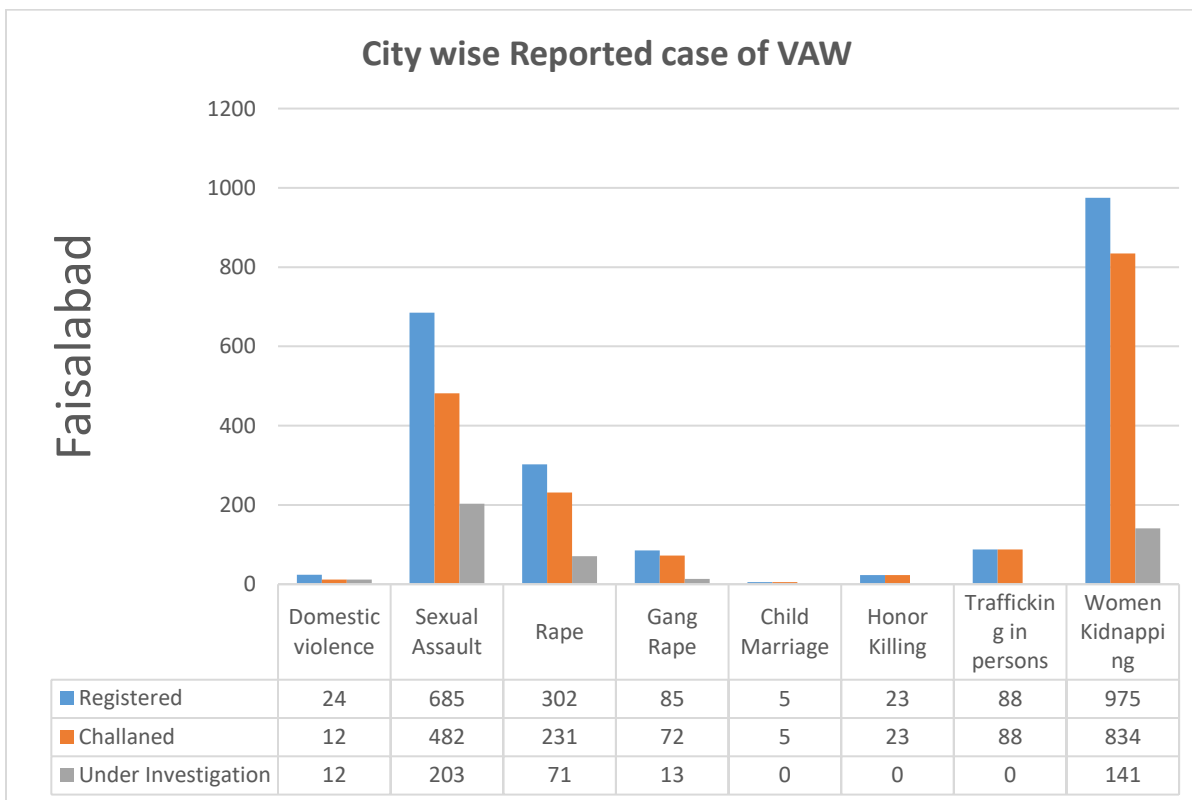


Figure 4 Data obtained through RTI from AIG monitoring / Punjab Police 2025

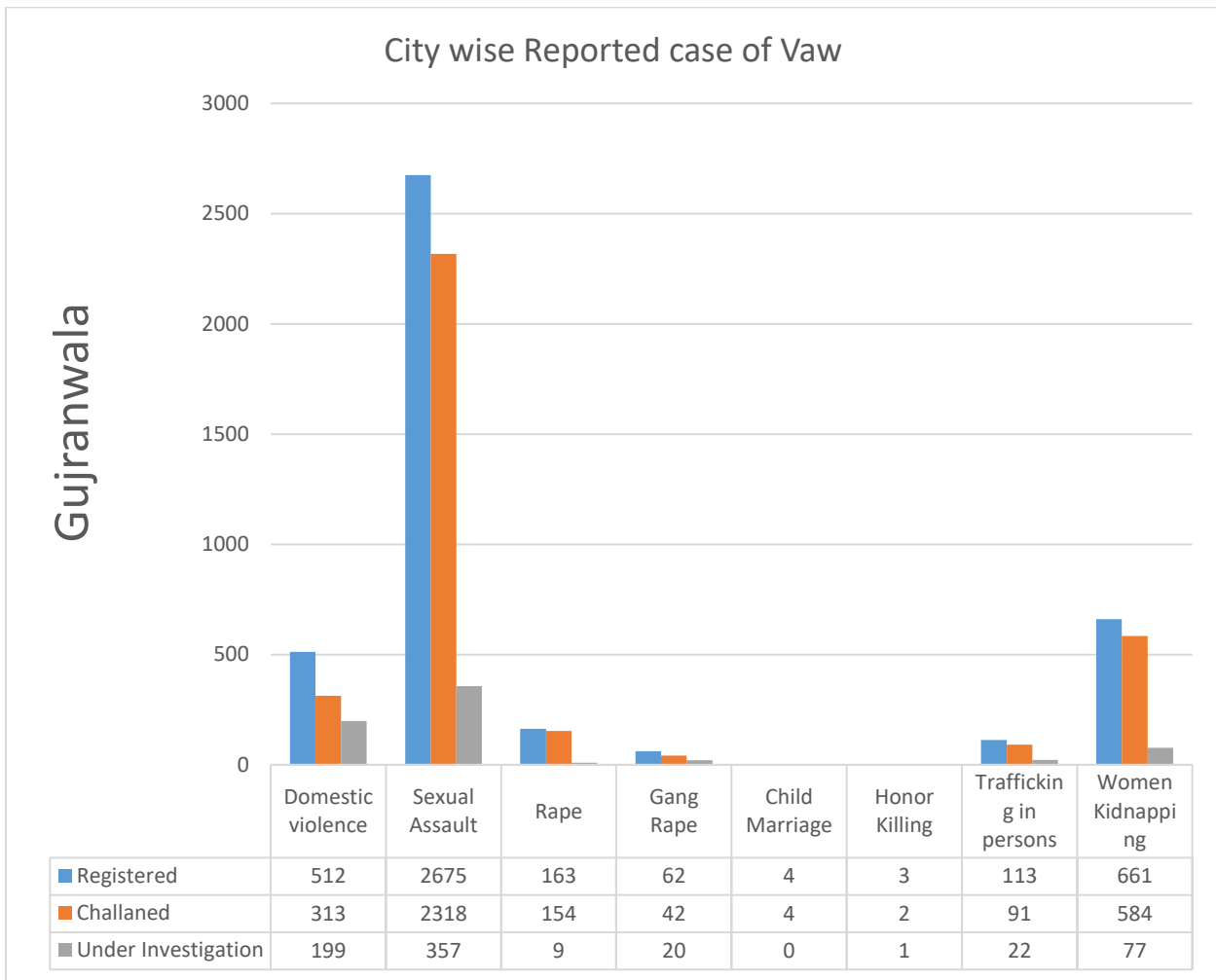


Figure 5 Data obtained through RTI from AIG monitoring / Punjab Police 2025

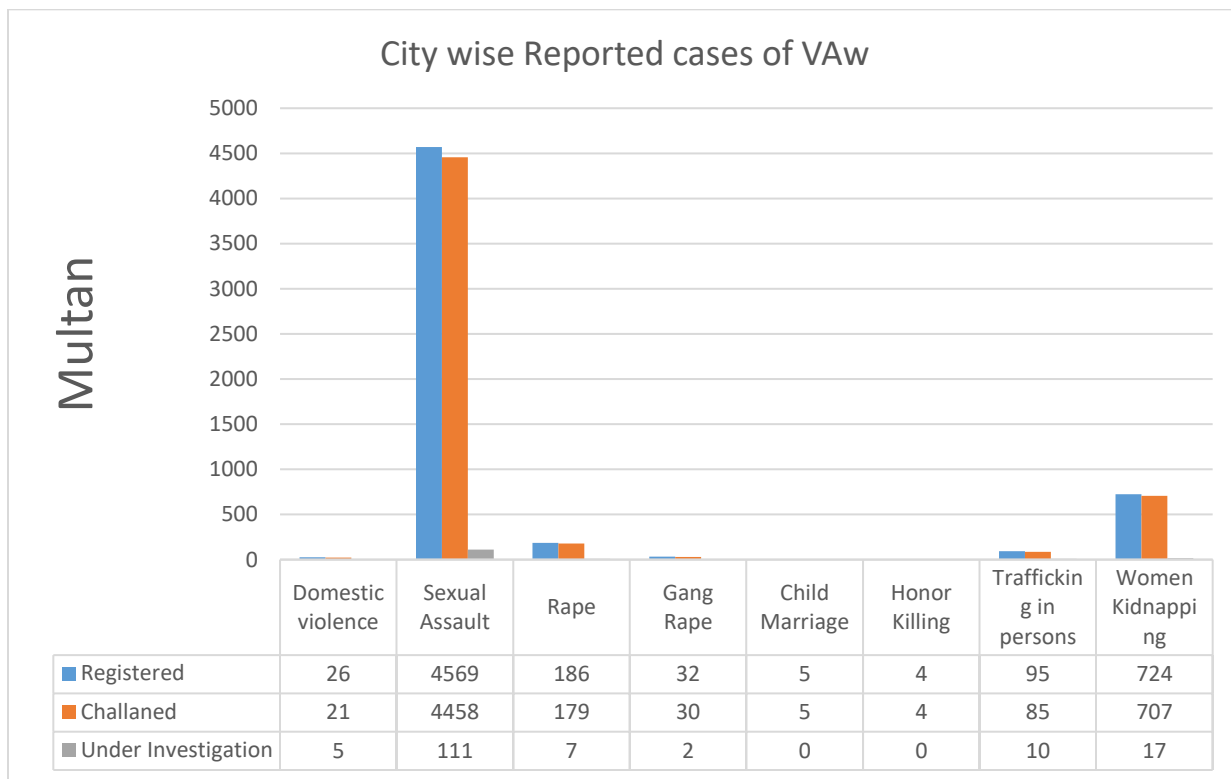


Figure 6 Data obtained through RTI from AIG monitoring / Punjab Police 2025

3.3 The Underreporting Abyss: What the Data cannot see.

The number of 24514 cases handled by the Police is not the actual size of the crisis of VAW in Punjab, but rather the tip of a very large iceberg. The data of the multi-year survey provided by the HRCP consistently approximates that 70-90 percent of the cases of domestic violence stay unreported, being suppressed due to a complex of economic dependency, social stigma, family pressure, religious authority, and the acquired distrust in the police and the judicial system that have traditionally reinforced the survivors instead of their safety (HRCP, 2022). When this figure is used to translate the 1074 domestic violence cases of the Punjab Police, there could be more domestic violence in Punjab than 10000 cases in a year. In the case of honor killings, of which 208 cases were reported, it is definitely more than that, since most honor killings are covered up as suicides, accidents, or natural deaths and the investigations are conducted with little forensic rigor.

The largest category of the invisible category is marital rape: AIG Monitoring Punjab Police data show 0 cases of marital rape, not because this crime does not exist, but because it is not a crime according to the Pakistani legislation. The PPC section 375 specifically excuses a husband against rape even when he engages in intercourse with his wife in spite of consent. CEDAW Committee has also twice called out marital rape as criminalized in its final observations of Pakistan, saying that such exemption breaches Articles 2(f), 5(a), and 16(1)(c) and contributes to the idea that women are the property of marriage (CEDAW Committee, 2019). According to UNICEF (2020) data, 21 percent of Pakistani women were married off before the age of 18 in 2020, implying that early-age marriage, which is only captured in the data, is significantly underreported due to this prevalence rate of 21 percent in the country. The sum total is that, official data, however mighty it may be, is a very deep-rooted understatement of the real toll of gender-based violence.

Legal Framework: Paper and in Practice Laws

4.1 The Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act, 2016

The PPWVA 2016 was the most extensive provincial level legislation on VAW in the history of the country

and was in itself a direct response to the long time demands of CEDAW to be provided with specific legislation on domestic violence. The Act includes Protection Orders, where an abuser must stop being violent and leave the house that they share with another, Residence Orders, which ensures a survivor a right to stay in the family house and Monetary Orders, in which the abuser must pay household bills during a court case (Punjab Government, 2016). These civil remedies are based on the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act that women rights groups had been lobbying decades to have in place; and are not an alternative to criminal prosecution, but to offer urgent relief without putting the victim through the criminal procedure. Another institution created by the PPWVA was the institutional frame of Violence Against Women Centers (VAWCs), which are co-located with the district courts, and these centers offer the following services in one roof: a police complaint desk with the mandatory 24 hours obligation of FIR registration; a medical examination room with female doctors; a psychological counselling suite; a legal aid cell; a crisis shelter where temporary accommodation can be created; and a coordination desk connected to the social protection services (Punjab Government, 2021). As of 2023, Punjab had operationalized VAWCs in fifteen of its thirty-six districts, and in the 2022 alone, the Lahore VAWC documented 4800 clients (Punjab Government, 2021). Punjab Police data of 1074 cases of domestic violence is dealt with mainly on this VAWC framework - but the twenty-one non-VC districts in that data have tens of millions of women with no service infrastructure of any kind.

4.2 Federal Laws: Trafficking in Persons Act 2018 and Anti-Rape Act 2020.

The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2020 was passed on the basis of Article 142 of the Constitution, is the most notable federal-level intervention into sexual violence in Pakistan ever. The main provisions are: required creation of Anti-Rape Crisis Cells (ARCCs) in every tertiary care hospital with a designated Examination Officer; a ban on the two-finger test and other degrading types of examination; the establishment of a national DNA Forensic Agency (NADFA) to process biological evidences; a national Sex Offenders Register; the designation of special courts with a four-month completion of cases aim; the avoidance of the publicity of survivor identification in the media; and in-court procedures to protect the identity of the survivor (The Punjab Police data in 5061 rape and gang-rape cases is within the jurisdiction of this legislative framework. In 2022, however, the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW) assessed that ARCCs had been instituted in eleven of fifty-four designated hospitals in the country, NADFA was functioning in only Islamabad and Lahore, and the trial target was a four-month target being achieved in less than 3 per cent of special cases (NCSW, 2022).

The Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2018 regulates 2137 cases of trafficking in the Punjab Police data. It is a better legislative improvement on the insufficient provision of Section 369-A of the Pakistan Penal Code that it has replaced. The Act tells a story of trafficking in a comprehensive manner that encompasses recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, and receipt of individuals by force, fraud, misrepresentation, power abuse, and payments with an aim of exploitation, such as sexual, forced labor, organ harvesting, and forced marriage (Government of Pakistan, 2018). Life imprisonment, which is the maximum penalty of adult trafficking and ten years imprisonment which is the maximum penalty of children trafficking is a significant increase over the previous frameworks. Nevertheless, according to the UNODC in its 2021 report on Pakistan, efforts are still limited by a lack of sufficient funding on anti-trafficking police departments, a lack of recognized victim identification procedures in most districts, and the lack of access to specialized rehabilitation services to the 2137 victims identified (UNODC, 2021).

Gap Analysis of CEDAW Compliance.

Partially but incompletely complying with the benchmarks of the General Recommendation CEDAW 35, when analyzed in a systematic manner, portrays that the law framework of Pakistan is partially compliant. On the one hand, the civil protection order mechanism of the PPWVA is consistent with the GR35 provision of

immediate protection measures; the ARCC framework of the Anti-Rape Act addresses the need to provide specialized services; the broad examination of the definition of trafficking is consistent with the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (Palermo Protocol); and the minimum age provision in the Trafficking Act responds, although inadequately, to the GR35 provision of outlawing child marriage (CEDAW Committee, 2017).

There are five major gaps on the deficit side. To start with, the failure to criminalize marital rape violates Articles 2(f) and 16 as well as GR 35 explicit mandate that marital rape should be criminalized irrespective of whether the rape is done in marriage. Second, the lack of a federal law on VAW that encompasses all the types of gender-based violence, such as psychological and economic abuse, does not meet the comprehensiveness criterion of GR35. Third, compound ability clauses in Section 302 (murder, acting in honor killings) enable families to effectively pardon the murderers and to release them, which has the effect of effectively legalizing honor killing, which is a direct breach of Article 2 of CEDAW Article 2 (eliminating discriminatory laws and practices). Fourth, a lack of complete sex-disaggregated VAW data is in contravention of data collection requirement of GR 35. Fifth, the operational framework of GR 35 is not completely based on legal equality as Article 2 and Article 16 are not funded in Pakistan (CEDAW Committee, 2019).

Judicial Performance:

5.1 Conviction Rates: Under -1 and Its Implications

The rape conviction rate is the most devastating quantitative measure of the failure of Pakistan criminal justice system when it comes to gender-based violence: this figure is always estimated at less than 1 percent of registered cases in a variety of research studies carried out over several years (HRCP, 2022). Considering the 3808 rape incidents, and 1253 gang-rape incidences in the Punjab Police data which is 5061 real incidences in total in 2025, the conviction rate of less than 1 percent of all the prosecutions in a particular year means that only 51 people were convicted and sentenced of rape and gang-rape. The rest of the 5010-plus cases either result in acquittal, withdrawal, compromise settlements or perpetual adjournment. It is not a justice system that wards sexual violence, it is one that ensures its officialization.

The 2021 annual report by the NCSW described the rates of conviction of GBV in general as alarmingly low, a statement that applies not only to rape but also to trafficking (due to the complicated nature of its evidence-gathering and the fear of intimidation of witnesses making it extremely hard to convict the suspect), honor killings (where the compoundability of the perpetrator can be used to absolve him before the court), and domestic violence (where police often turn the case onto mediation, instead of prosecution) (NCSW, 2021). CEDAW GR 35 obliges the states parties to provide that all types of gender-based violence are criminally prosecuted and the punishment corresponding proportionally and effectively in deterring character they must adequately meet (CEDAW Committee, 2017). The message sub-1 percent conviction rates convey- to potential offenders, to survivors who may or may not report it, to police who may or may not investigate it, to the international community that evaluates whether Pakistan has been doing as it agreed to in the treaty is that gender-based violence in Punjab is effectively zero-risk.

5.2 Systemic Bottlenecks: FIR to Acquittal

The process of a VAW case going through the criminal justice system of Punjab is an obstacle course whereby the first stage is the police station and the last stage is institutional failure of the vast majority of survivors. Police opposition to FIR registration at the initial contact point is the first access-to-justice barrier: police often categorize domestic violence reports as family issues, refer rape survivors to mediation with their abusers, scrutinize victims as individuals, and do not allow to register FIR without a superior officer, which is described as secondary victimization by the state institutions by CEDAW GR 35 (CEDAW Committee, 2017). In the 2022 report by the HRCP, it was recorded that in some districts of Punjab, women who presented

themselves before the police with open wounds of domestic violence were sent back home with written prescriptions to go and reconcile with the husband. One of the most important implementation failures of the provincial VAW response architecture is the mismatch between the mandatory registration requirement of the PPWVA and its real-world implementation in police stations.

In the court system, even cases that pass through the police screening system are further lost. The audit by the Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan (2021) of sexual violence in the Pakistani district courts of Punjab revealed a pendency of 2.8 years on average in a FIR registration to final decision on a case- on average, five years- a higher pendency than the four-month targets of the Anti-Rape Act 2020 (Law and Justice Commission of Pakistan, 2021). Even 2025 data of 15,569 kidnappings are even more seriously backlogged: kidnapping indictments pursuant to Section 365-B include complicated investigations, two or more defendants, and habitual witness loss, and are often not tried after three to seven years. GR35 statement of the CEDAW Committee that delayed justice is a denial of justice and that states parties must take timely, effective and accessible remedies is clearly inapplicable to a system in which the mechanics of the structure close to ensure the opposite (CEDAW Committee, 2017).

Support Mechanisms and Institutions.

6.1 The VAWC Network and Government Infrastructure

The Violence Against Women Centers of Punjab are the most creative institutional reaction to the crisis and received a great international interest as a possible example to other provinces and nations. The first VAWC was launched in Multan in 2017 with the help of UN Women and offers twenty-four-hour integrated services, which incorporate a police desk with the compulsory FIR registration, medical examination facility with female doctors, psychological support suite, legal aid cell, day shelter and short-term residential facility, and a coordination desk, which is connected to the case management system of the Women Development Department (Punjab Government, 2021). Lahore VAWC opened in 2018 alone handled 4800 cases of gender violence response in 2022, which is one of the high-volume response centers of gender violence in South Asia (Punjab Government, 2021). As of December 2025, VAWCs were active in fifteen districts - Lahore, Multan, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, Gujranwala, Sialkot, Rahim Yar Khan, Sahiwal, Sargodha, Bahawalpur, DG Khan, Sheikhpura, Gujrat, Jhang and Kasur - out of twenty-one exclusively rural districts.

In addition to the VAWCs, the provincial support architecture consists of the national helpline 1737, which offers twenty-four-hour telephonic referral services; the Pucaar-15 emergency response service, which is integrated with the emergency police response system; the thirty-six Dar-ul-Aman shelters, which temporarily accommodates women who have been victims of violence, provides them with food and basic services; and the Gender Crime Branch itself, an investigative and data monitoring organization with sub-offices in each of the thirty-six districts of Punjab (The Women Police Desks created by the PPWVA at all the police stations are supposed to offer gender sensitive entry point of contact to the female complainants. Yet, in 2022, the assessment by the HRCP established that 43% of Women Police Desks were filled with trained female officers working in full-time capacity, and that in most stations the desk was co-located with the general duty room without privacy provisions, where many survivors could not practically register complaints with much privacy (HRCP, 2022).

6.2 Gaps in Institutional Capacity as Formulated by CEDAW

In its 2019 final recommendations on Pakistan, the CEDAW Committee has highlighted inadequate shelter capacity as one of the most problematic institutional gaps, indicating that the number and capacity of shelters were evidently too limited in comparison to the need in a country of 220 million people (CEDAW Committee, 2019). The Dar-ul-Aman shelters in Punjab that serve a provincial population of about 110 million people with about 53 million women have an estimated capacity of 3000 to 4000 places (NCSW, 2021). In the context of a reported 24514 cases of VAW per annum that necessitate safety and support, the capacity gap is very

high: fewer than 15 per cent of reported survivors of the reported cases can access shelter services on the same day. Shelters often do not have interpreters, minority-specific services, or personnel trained to deal with forced conversion and religiously-motivated violence, especially in the case of minority women Christian, Hindu, and Ahmadi women, who are often vulnerable in compound (Shirkat Gah, 2020).

Social and Cultural Conditions: The Architecture of Violence

7.1 Patriarchy: Honor, Control, and Violence

Article 5 of CEDAW requires the state parties to change social and cultural patterns of behavior that are grounded in the inferiority or superiority of either sex or in stereotyped roles of men and women. The cultural formations of specific depth and permanence challenge this obligation in Punjab. Honor killing - 208 of the cases in the 2025 data of the Police (with actual prevalence estimated several times more) represents an idea of family honor as being located in the bodies and behavior of women. A woman who marries of her choice, demands divorce, continues with her education without following family desires, or is simply suspected of such becomes *kala* -blackened- and can be killed by her male kinsmen on instructions of the *jirga* or family council. The 1990 ordinance that added the Qisas and Diyat Ordinance to the PPC permits the heirs of a victim of a murder to forgive the perpetrator, and, in honor killings, the heirs and the perpetrators are frequently members of the same family, therefore making this a de-facto impunity mechanism (HRCP, 2022). This was specifically recommended by the CEDAW Committee in its 2019 review, which stated that compoundability should not be used in prosecutions of honor killing but this recommendation has not been adopted (CEDAW Committee, 2019).

In 2025 Early-age marriage, 111 registered instances, which is a major underreport of UNICEF estimation that 21 per cent of Pakistani women were married at a young age, is one of many manifestations of the cross of patriarchal economic rationality and gender disparity (UNICEF, 2020). Girls are created economically as burdens which their early marriage minimizes the family spending and creates bride price at the same time eliminating the perceived burden of protecting female honor by the family. Child brides are facing significantly increased probability of obstetric complications - World Health Organization estimates that girls below the age of 18 are 5 times more likely to die during childbirth than women older than 29 (WHO, 2020), receive early education that ensures their reliance on older economic partners, and become highly vulnerable to domestic abuse by older partners. The Child Marriage Restraint Act, which has been last reformed to align standards of federal level up to minimum age of 18 years in girls, has very weak enforcement mechanisms: local union councils where marriage is registered have little power or willingness to check the age, and digital national identity card systems are often bypassed (UNICEF, 2020).

7.2 Economic Vulnerability, Trafficking and Dimension of Minorities.

The 2137 trafficking cases reported by the Police is an intersection of economic challenges, geographical mobility and exploitative criminal networks that the framework offered by CEDAW tackles under Article 6 that mandates the suppression of any type of trafficking and prostitution-related exploitation (CEDAW Committee, 2019). The rural districts of Punjab, especially those that lie within the southern-most belt experiencing endemic poverty, limited livelihoods and high informal labor migration rates, are the main source of internal trafficking networks (UNODC, - 2021). The process of recruitment is often organized via the help of reputable social networks: neighbors, distant relatives, informal labor brokers and even religious leaders who offer the opportunity to make a living in domestic service, factory or marry as a decent choice. By the moment the deception is revealed, the survivors are usually isolated, economically manipulated, and in most cases fearful of being beaten, raped, or threatened by the perpetrator against themselves or their families.

In its final conclusions, CEDAW requests specifically Pakistan to attend to the compound vulnerabilities of minority women, in that, Christian and Hindu girls are disproportionately the victims of forced conversion

and forced marriage, which is a compound form of trafficking involving religious coercion, sexual violence, and exploitation (CEDAW Committee, 2019). According to the HRCP, no less than 1000 girls (Hindu and Christian) are forcibly converted and married every year in Pakistan, with Punjab and Sindh reporting the most cases (HRCP, 2022). The PPWVA, the Anti-Rape Act, the Trafficking Act, as well as the VAWC framework of Punjab do not include the provisions on forced conversion and marriage as a separate form of VAW. This institutional and legislative coverage is a particular CEDAW non-compliance which the Punjab government is yet to tackle.

Dominating Problems and Implementation Problems

One of the most significant legal innovations in the Punjab legal system in terms of VAW response is the compulsory FIR registration clause of the PPWVA 2016, as well as one of the most systematically abused. Though the wording of the provision was clear and the police were obliged to file an FIR once they received any domestic violence complaint, field surveys carried out by the HRCP in 2022 revealed that in reality, police in most of the surveyed stations still resorted to a policy of mediating first, and physically blocked women who wanted to file an FIR by insisting that they invite male relatives to the station, inquire into the truth of the injuries, or insist on written statements by elders in the community (HRCP, 2022). The women who managed to get FIRs registered frequently faced a second impediment: gender-insensitive investigative officers (male officers, who had not received gender insensitivity training) were assigned to investigate the cases and questioned the survivors in front of relatives or alleged attackers, and the routine action of discarding signs of assault as insufficient.

The issue of under-investment in VAWC is a long-term structural issue. A 2021 review of the VAWCs in Punjab discovered that fourteen out of fifteen running VAWCs had fewer than 70 per cent of their authorized staffing complement in place, with the most acute vacancies in psychological counselors (only 48 per cent of posts filled), legal aid officers (only 52 per cent filled) and medical examiners (only 61 per cent filled) (Punjab Government, 2021). The Women Development Department (the provincial agency that oversees the activities of VAWC) received a budget lower than 0.5 per cent of the overall budget of the Punjab government during the fiscal year 2022-23; in comparison with 1.5-2 share that the gender advocates and UN Women have suggested as the minimum budget to respond to VAWC (Shirkat Gah, 2020). This institutional starvation establishes a highly sadistic institutional relationship: the PPWVA sets up legal expectations and institutional claims that under-resourced VAWCs cannot fulfill, destroying the trust of survivors and creating the sense that formal justice systems do not serve women like Ayesha.

8.2 Reporting Cultural Barriers and the Silence Economy

There is nothing curious about the fact that the HRCP estimates that domestic violence cases are underreported by 70-90% percent the result of a complex, well-structured social economy of silence which actively rewards silence (HRCP, 2022). In the case of gang-rape victims, the 1 253 cases in the data, the calculus of silence is especially inhumane: as well as the practical barriers of police resistance and judicial inaction, the immediate social effects such as family rejection, ostracization by the community and in some instances secondary victimization through the accusation that the dress, behavior or presence of the victim in a given location led to the attack. The HRCP has recorded numerous instances whereby victims of rape in Punjab were coerced by their own families to get married to their rapists, the law which the Coercion in Marriage clauses of the PPC formally disallows, but the societal power enforces much more actively than the law (HRCP, 2022).

The non-withdrawal of the CEDAW reservations of Articles 2 and 16 continues to legitimize the practice of silence in Pakistan as it signals women the utmost authority of the state that full legal equality in the family life of women is not yet here to stay. When the state operates on that very principle that Islamic family law may trump the right of women to equality in marriage, the patriarch in the community who tells a rape survivor that going to the police will bring disgrace to the family is working within a logic of culture that the state has

tacitly accepted. Conquering this economy of silence can only be achieved through approaches beyond legal changes, it is necessary to transform the cultural codes that shape the bodies of women as a site of the family honor and their suffering as the personal issue beyond the reach of justice in the community (Zakar et al., 2013).

Recommendations: A CEDAW reform agenda

9.1 Legal and Treaty Reforms: The Non-Negotiating Foundation

The first legal reform is the unqualified withdrawal of the reservation on CEDAW Articles 2, 9, 16, and 29 by Pakistan. The legal framework within which the discriminatory practices, such as honor killing, forced early marriage, marital rape, and unequal divorce and custody laws, are perpetuated, is these same reservations, which were upheld after twenty-eight years (the distance separating the initial and the most recent CEDAW Committee's requests to withdraw them) despite being actively encouraged by the Supreme Court of Pakistan in its *Suo Motu Case 1 of 2019*, which has already acknowledged that equality and equal rights of women are constitutional subjects and must be entirely upheld (Ali, 2000). The withdrawal should be accompanied by the corresponding legislative and regulatory changes it makes possible: Criminalization of marital rape by amending PPC Section 375; the elimination of the compoundability clause of Section 302 in honor killings; an alignment of the enforcement provisions of the Child Marriage Restraint Act with the outlaw of child marriage in CEDAW 16; and a comprehensive federal Violence against Women and Girls Act consolidating the existing fragmented frameworks and filling in the gaps that GR 35 has identified.

Pakistan also needs to move faster in executing suggestions made by the entire spectrum of UN treaty bodies that analyzes its human rights sides. The recommendations of the UN Human Rights Committee of 2017 on marital rape criminalization and police accountability, the CAT recommendations of 2017 on custodial protection of women detainees, and the repeated recommendations of the Universal Periodic Review on women's rights all go hand in hand with the analysis of the CEDAW Committee (UN Human Rights Committee, 2017). An inter-ministerial action plan that integrates all the recommendations made by the treaty bodies in one unified structure- instead of looking at the observations of each treaty body as individual entities- would go a long way in enhancing the effectiveness with which the implementation takes place as well as to demonstrate real political goodwill in the regard to the international human-rights standards.

9.2 Institutional Reforms: Resources to What Has Been Promised

The most pressing institutional change is the finalization of the VAWC network in Punjab in all the thirty-six districts. Twenty-one districts that do not have VAWCs now cover an approximated population of 50 million rural women (easier than the aggregate population of a few European nations) with no coordinated gender violence response system (Punjab Government, 2021). It would take four years and require a minimum of PKR2 billion of funding per year with technical assistance of UN Women and UNODC to have full provincial coverage (Shirkat Gah, 2020). Current VAWCs need to be concurrently staffed to the maximum, and female psychologists, legal aid officers, and medical examiners recruited into the service in communities served by them, and all staff required to undergo gender-sensitivity training annually.

Police reform is also an urgent matter that needs to be operationalized with definite accountable measures. All police stations in Punjab should include a trained female officer to take the complaint of VAW twenty-four hours daily, seven days weekly; a mandatory protocol of registering the FIR with oversight accountability frameworks to deviation; monthly reporting data to the disaggregated by crime type, registration outcome, and investigating officer; and external civilian monitoring system with the power to investigate FIR refusal reports and attain disciplinary penalties (HRCP, 2022; NCSW, 2021). At the judicial level, the 4-month trial target of the Anti-Rape Act should be implemented by creating special case-management systems, special courts with gender-trained judges, a bar on character evidence of the sexual history of survivors, and compulsory impact assessment of the victim before sentencing (Government of Pakistan, 2020).

10. Conclusion: From Paper Commitments to Living Justice

When Ayesha walked out of that Lahore police station in 2021, case withdrawn and husband free, she carried with her the weight of every institutional failure this article has documented: a police system that treats domestic violence as a private dispute, a judicial system that processes 24,514 cases and convicts fewer than 1% of accused in the most serious offenses, a shelter system with capacity for fewer than 15% of documented survivors, and a treaty commitment - ratified twenty-eight years ago - that the Pakistani state has never had the political will to honor in full. She was not failed by a single law or a single officer. She was failed by a system. That system is the product of specific, identifiable, and remediable failures - not of cultural determinism or inevitable developmental trajectory. Pakistan has enacted significant laws: the PPWVA 2016, the Anti-Rape Act 2020, the Trafficking in Persons Act 2018, the VAWC framework. These laws exist. The VAWCs exist. The Gender Crime Branch exists, and it is counting. 24,514 cases in a single year in a single province, averaging 85 a day, constitutes a documented emergency whose scale demands that we reject the comfortable fiction that the legal machinery is simply slow and will eventually deliver justice. It will not deliver justice without structural transformation, because the structural barriers - CEDAW reservation maintenance, sub-1% conviction rates, police FIR resistance, a marital rape exemption that renders millions of women invisible to the law, shelter capacity that covers 15% of need - are not incidental inefficiencies but load-bearing elements of an architecture of impunity.

CEDAW provides the blueprint for dismantling that architecture. Article 2 demands the elimination of discrimination embedded in law and practice. Article 5 demands the transformation of the patriarchal norms that honor killing, forced early marriage, and domestic violence express. Article 16 demands full legal equality in marriage and family life, including the criminalization of marital rape. General Recommendation 35 demands comprehensive laws, specialized institutions, gender-trained police and judges, adequate shelters, universal data systems, and effective remedies. The Concluding Observations of 2019 demand that Pakistan withdraw its reservations, criminalize marital rape, expand its shelter network, and report annually against disaggregated indicators. None of these demands are new. Many have been made repeatedly, across multiple review cycles, across multiple treaty bodies, across multiple decades.

What is required now is not another international recommendation but a political decision at the highest levels of the Pakistani state: to treat the 24,514 documented cases in Punjab not as a public relations problem to be managed but as a national emergency to be solved. That means withdrawing the CEDAW reservations today, not after the next review cycle. It means criminalizing marital rape now, not after the next election. It means fully funding the VAWC expansion, holding police accountable for FIR refusal, operationalizing the Anti-Rape Act's four-month trial target, and building the data systems that make accountability measurable. It means treating Ayesha and the 24,513 documented cases around her, and the hundreds of thousands of undocumented ones not as statistics, but as rights-holders to whom the state owes the full force of its legal obligations.

Punjab's VAW data is a mirror held up to institutional performance. What it reflects is a system that has promised much and delivered little. Pakistan ratified CEDAW in 1996 as a statement of national aspiration. Nearly three decades later, with 24,514 cases per year in a single province, with conviction rates below 1%, with marital rape still legal, and with the same reservations still on file in Geneva, the gap between that aspiration and that reality remains the greatest single measure of unfinished justice in Pakistan. The path forward is known. It is documented in CEDAW GR 35, in the 2019 Concluding Observations, in the recommendations of HRC, NCSW, and Shirkat Gah. What it requires is not knowledge but political courage. The 24,514 victims of 2025 and the millions who came before them, and the thousands who will come tomorrow at 85 per day - can wait no longer.

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