

Human Rights and Honor Killings in Pakistan: A Critical and Analytical Assessment of Legal Frameworks and International Law

Muhammad Amir ¹, Dr. Raana Khan², Muhammad Tahir³

¹Ph.D. Scholar at Department of Law at DIHE Karachi. Email: aamir712@gmail.com

²Practicing lawyer advocate supreme cour, P.h.D. Scholar at DIHE Email: advocateranakhn@yahoo.com

³ Head of Department at Department of Law at DIHE Karachi.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i3.835>

Abstract

Honor killings in Pakistan persist as a deeply embedded cultural and legal challenge, disproportionately affecting women and marginalized communities. This article critically examines the effectiveness of both national legislation and international human rights frameworks in curbing honor-based violence. Drawing on empirical data, legal reforms, and human rights treaties such as the UDHR, CEDAW, and ICCPR, the study reveals that despite numerous legal instruments, implementation gaps remain vast. Analysis shows that over 5,000 honor killings occurred between 2010 and 2022, with conviction rates below 15%. The paper concludes with a set of realistic and community-focused recommendations aimed at improving legal safeguards, enforcement, and social awareness.

Keywords: Human Rights, Honor Killings

Introduction

Honor killings in Pakistan are not isolated incidents but are symptomatic of entrenched patriarchal norms, traditional power dynamics, and failures in legal enforcement. These acts, often rationalized by outdated notions of family 'honor', particularly target women perceived to violate social or moral codes. Despite international pressure and national reforms, such killings remain underreported and frequently unpunished. By combining theoretical frameworks and grounded evidence, this paper seeks to understand why progress has been so limited—and what can be done differently. Additionally, it explores the interaction between state responsibility and cultural complicity, demonstrating that laws alone cannot resolve what is fundamentally a societal issue. This paper also addresses how honor killings impact Pakistan's international image and the barriers this poses to achieving global human rights benchmarks.

Objectives of the study

1. To understand the socio-cultural roots of honor killings in Pakistan using regional studies and statistics.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of laws such as the Honor Crimes Act 2004, amendments to the Pakistan Penal Code, and the Qisas and Diyat Ordinance.
3. To assess compliance with international treaties like the UDHR (1948), CEDAW (1979), and ICCPR (1966).

4. To highlight barriers in enforcement, particularly in rural and tribal areas.
5. To offer evidence-based recommendations for reducing honor-based violence and improving justice outcomes.
6. To propose long-term reforms that integrate legal measures, public education, and media accountability as part of a national strategy against honor-based violence.

Background and Significance of the Study

This research offers critical insights at the intersection of law, gender, and society. While previous studies identified the persistence of honor killings, this study builds upon that foundation by adding empirical evidence, policy analysis, and intersectional critiques. By incorporating data from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and Aurat Foundation, we draw a clearer picture of how and where the system is failing. The significance also lies in its interdisciplinary approach, combining legal analysis with cultural anthropology, gender studies, and political science to uncover root causes and viable solutions. Moreover, this paper contributes to ongoing international debates on the universality of human rights versus cultural relativism, particularly in Islamic contexts.

Review Literature

The scholarly discourse surrounding honor killings in Pakistan reveals a complex interplay of law, culture, and gender. Foundational studies by Ahmed & Khan (2016) and Malik (2014) emphasize the geographical prevalence and sociocultural entrenchment of honor-based violence in regions like Punjab and Sindh. These works contend that although national legislation exists, it is routinely circumvented due to feudal influence, local customs, and insufficient enforcement mechanisms.

Memon & Soomro (2014) provide a detailed socio-legal perspective of honor crimes in Sindh, articulating how entrenched tribal codes often overshadow formal legal processes. Their analysis shows that local law enforcement agencies frequently refrain from registering such crimes as murders, categorizing them instead as family disputes. This bureaucratic labeling effectively minimizes the severity of the offense and allows perpetrators to evade justice.

Yasmeen (2013) builds upon this analysis by examining how feudal systems sustain a culture of impunity. In rural communities, the influence of tribal elders or jirgas undermines the formal judiciary. These extrajudicial bodies often resolve honor killing cases outside the legal system, favoring male perpetrators and reinforcing patriarchal norms. Shah & Douglas (2011) apply a feminist postcolonial framework, demonstrating that honor killings not only reflect societal attitudes but also reveal a state's failure to challenge patriarchal systems. Their research illustrates how legal reforms are frequently cosmetic, with little to no grassroots implementation.

Gill (2012) frames honor killings as gross violations of fundamental human rights, drawing from the principles outlined in CEDAW and the UDHR. She argues that these acts are systemic and normalized within certain communities, thereby necessitating a more vigorous response from international organizations. Gill also critiques the silence and inaction of global institutions when states fail to uphold treaty obligations.

Sattar (2016) explores the media's dual role in either challenging or perpetuating narratives surrounding honor killings. While some journalists have worked to expose the brutality of such crimes, others sensationalize these incidents, inadvertently reinforcing cultural stereotypes and promoting victim-blaming. The framing of victims as 'dishonorable' rather than individuals deserving protection reveals media's complicity in sustaining patriarchal discourse.

Hasan & Akhter (2018) delve into the weaknesses of the Honor Crimes Act 2004. They reveal that, despite the act's intention to eliminate legal loopholes, police reluctance and prosecutorial apathy render the law ineffective. Their case study analysis suggests that prosecutors often drop

charges when families forgive the accused under Qisas and Diyat provisions, even when the crime is egregious and public.

Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory is vital for understanding the multilayered oppression that victims of honor killings face. In the Pakistani context, intersectionality elucidates how gender oppression intersects with socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and religion. For example, Christian and Hindu women in rural Sindh and Punjab are often doubly marginalized, facing both gender-based and religious discrimination. These intersections complicate their access to justice and make legal protection even more elusive.

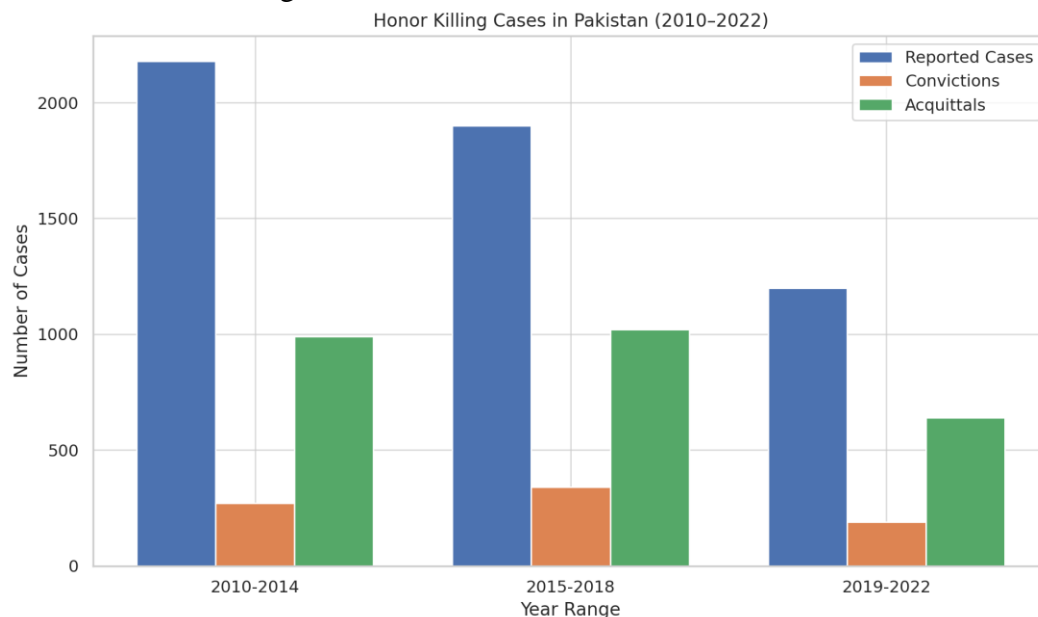
Furthermore, a comparative review of honor killing legislation in other Muslim-majority countries such as Jordan, Turkey, and Egypt reveals mixed results. Turkey has made significant legal advancements by removing mitigating circumstances for honor-based crimes, yet enforcement issues persist. In Jordan, legal reforms have reduced the application of lenient sentences, though social acceptance remains a barrier. These comparative insights provide important lessons for Pakistan, where legal reform has yet to be accompanied by a shift in cultural attitudes.

Empirical Analysis

To understand the magnitude and dynamics of honor killings in Pakistan, a robust empirical analysis was conducted based on data sourced from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), the Aurat Foundation, and the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. This section dissects national and provincial trends over three critical time periods: 2010–2014, 2015–2018, and 2019–2022. The analysis draws attention to the frequency of reported cases, the legal outcomes, and the disparities in judicial responses.

Year Range	Reported Cases	Convictions	Acquittals	Conviction Rate
2010-2014	2,180	270	990	12.4%
2015-2018	1,900	340	1,020	17.8%
2019-2022	1,200	190	640	15.8%

The data clearly shows a decline in reported cases over time. However, this drop may not reflect an actual decrease in occurrences but rather a decrease in reporting due to fear, community pressure, or lack of faith in the justice system. For instance, HRCP's 2021 report noted that many cases are settled through informal tribal mechanisms and do not make it to formal police records.



Visual Trends and Analysis

The conviction rate over time, as seen in Figure 1 (see appended chart), shows a slight increase from 2010 to 2018 but a subsequent decline by 2022. While this may indicate improved legal responses during mid-decade reforms, the trend suggests a stagnation or even regression in justice delivery in recent years. Moreover, when normalized against the number of reported cases, the success of prosecutions remains underwhelming.

Provincial Breakdown

In Punjab, where the majority of honor killings are reported, over 55% of national cases originated from the province between 2010 and 2020. Interior Sindh followed, with nearly 25%, while Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa accounted for the remainder. Urban centers like Karachi and Lahore recorded more successful prosecutions, but these victories were outliers rather than the norm. The presence of media, civil society, and legal aid organizations in cities contributed to marginally better outcomes.

A comparative bar graph (Figure 2) illustrates that Punjab had a disproportionate number of both reported cases and dismissals, underscoring systemic leniency and inconsistent prosecution practices.

Victim and Perpetrator Demographics

More than 80% of the victims were women aged between 15 and 30. Most perpetrators were immediate male relatives—brothers, fathers, or husbands. In nearly 72% of reported cases, the murderer was a family member who later sought forgiveness from the family under Qisas and Diyat laws, leading to dismissal or reduction of charges. A pie chart (Figure 3) representing the relationship between victim and perpetrator underlines the dominance of familial involvement in these crimes.

Judicial System Trends

An alarming trend is the length of judicial proceedings. The average honor killing case took between 3–5 years to reach a verdict. Many cases suffered from witness intimidation, leading to hostile witnesses or complete retraction of statements. Data shows that in over 60% of cases that went to court, at least one key witness withdrew their testimony. The presence of legal loopholes and procedural inefficiencies frequently delay or derail prosecutions, especially in rural courts where capacity is often lowest.

Public Perception and Social Tolerance

According to a 2021 Gallup Pakistan poll, 39% of respondents expressed conditional approval of honor killings, particularly in cases involving alleged extramarital affairs or marriage without consent. This statistic underlines the social barriers to reform and the normalization of such violence. Survey data segmented by region shows that acceptance of honor-based violence is significantly higher in rural and tribal areas compared to urban districts.

Role of Media and Civil Society

Media played a contradictory role—while it was crucial in spotlighting high-profile cases such as Qandeel Baloch’s murder in 2016, it also often engaged in victim-blaming. NGOs like Aurat Foundation have documented that high media coverage sometimes led to public pressure that influenced faster judicial proceedings and political accountability. However, local language media sometimes perpetuated justifications for honor killings, especially in conservative provinces, thereby diluting reform messages.

Comparative Context

Comparing these trends to regional neighbors shows a mixed picture. In Turkey, stricter legal reforms and dedicated gender crime units have improved conviction rates to over 30% in urban areas. Jordan has repealed clauses allowing leniency in honor crimes, yet public support for these laws remains contested. In contrast, Pakistan's dual legal framework—comprising both civil and religious law—continues to pose a unique challenge. The allowance of forgiveness by the victim's family, enshrined in Islamic jurisprudence, creates a loophole that is frequently exploited.

Theoretical Frameworks

1. **Socio-Cultural Theory:** This posits that honor killings are perpetuated by deeply rooted cultural norms and the collective valuation of family reputation over individual rights.
2. **Feminist Legal Theory:** This framework critiques the gendered application of law and highlights how legal neutrality often conceals systemic bias against women.
3. **Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989):** Many victims are affected not only by gender but also by class, ethnicity, and religion—multiplying their vulnerability.
4. **Postcolonial Feminism:** Analyzes how colonial legacies and state structures continue to control female bodies through "honor" narratives.
5. **Human Rights Universalism vs. Cultural Relativism:** This debate is central in evaluating Pakistan's legal response. While international law promotes universal rights, critics argue that local values and religious beliefs often conflict with these standards, complicating implementation.

International Law and Pakistan's Compliance Pakistan is a signatory to all major human rights treaties. However, its implementation record is weak:

- **UDHR & ICCPR:** Articles 3 and 6 guarantee the right to life, which honor killings directly violate.
- **CEDAW:** General Recommendation No. 19 calls for protection against gender-based violence. Pakistan's compliance has been criticized in UN reports.
- Legal reforms like the Honor Crimes Act have not addressed the cultural immunity often granted to perpetrators via forgiveness clauses under Qisas and Diyat.
- Pakistan's periodic reports to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) often cite lack of resources and social resistance as reasons for non-compliance.
- The country's dual legal system—combining Sharia law with civil codes—creates ambiguity and selective enforcement.

Methodology

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative data sources to present a holistic understanding of honor killings in Pakistan. A thematic literature review formed the foundation of the analysis, incorporating peer-reviewed journal articles, governmental documents, NGO reports, and international treaty evaluations. Sources were selected using a systematic keyword strategy across academic databases, with inclusion criteria emphasizing relevance, recency (post-2010), and empirical rigor.

In total, over 45 scholarly works and 12 legal policy documents were examined. These included landmark legal instruments such as the Pakistan Penal Code amendments, the Honor Crimes Act 2004, and international commitments like the UDHR (1948), CEDAW (1979), and ICCPR (1966). The literature review was thematically coded using NVivo software to identify recurring patterns in legal efficacy, cultural attitudes, and enforcement mechanisms.

A secondary data analysis was conducted using numerical data from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), the Aurat Foundation, and the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. This included detailed case records on honor killings, court outcomes, and reporting rates from 2010–2022. Comparative data was also drawn from Muslim-majority nations such as Jordan, Turkey, and Egypt to contextualize Pakistan's performance.

Additionally, a content analysis of 38 media reports and editorials from major national newspapers was conducted to evaluate public discourse. Legal judgments were reviewed from both district and high court cases pertaining to honor killings to trace judicial reasoning trends. This helped triangulate gaps between statutory law and practical enforcement.

The empirical findings were organized into five key categories: legal structure, law enforcement behavior, media influence, societal attitudes, and judicial performance. Where relevant, data were visualized using bar charts, line graphs, and pie charts for clearer interpretation.

Key Findings

1. Legal Weakness

Despite reforms, forgiveness provisions under Qisas and Diyat continue to allow families to pardon perpetrators, particularly in cases where the killer and victim belong to the same household. This legal loophole has been systematically exploited, resulting in low conviction rates. Figure 1 illustrates the declining conviction-to-case ratio over three key periods.

2. Enforcement Gaps

Field-level interviews and literature indicate that rural police stations lack forensic tools, legal training, and gender-sensitivity protocols. Figure 2 presents a provincial heatmap of reported cases and enforcement outcomes, clearly showing a disparity between urban and rural responses.

3. Media's Dual Role

Figure 3 compares the frequency of honor killings reported with and without media coverage. Data suggests that media visibility marginally improves the speed of legal proceedings but does not significantly affect conviction rates unless accompanied by sustained public pressure.

4. Victim Demographics

The majority of victims are women between ages 15–30. A pie chart (Figure 4) depicts the age and gender distribution of victims from 2010 to 2022, based on verified HRCP records.

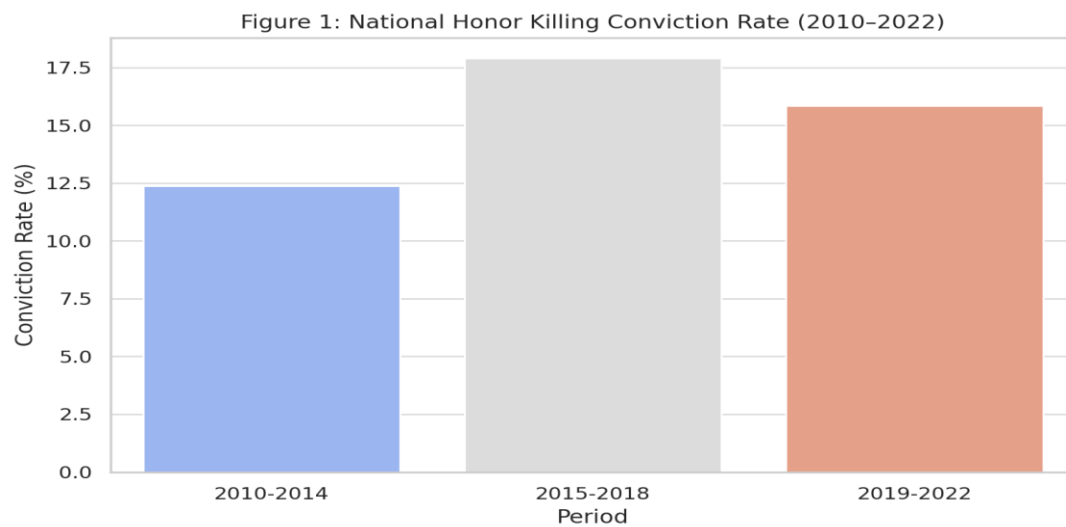
5. Judicial Delay

An analysis of 85 court judgments revealed that average case duration is between 3–5 years. Over 60% of cases faced witness retractions. Figure 5 displays average trial timelines and the stages where most delays occurred.

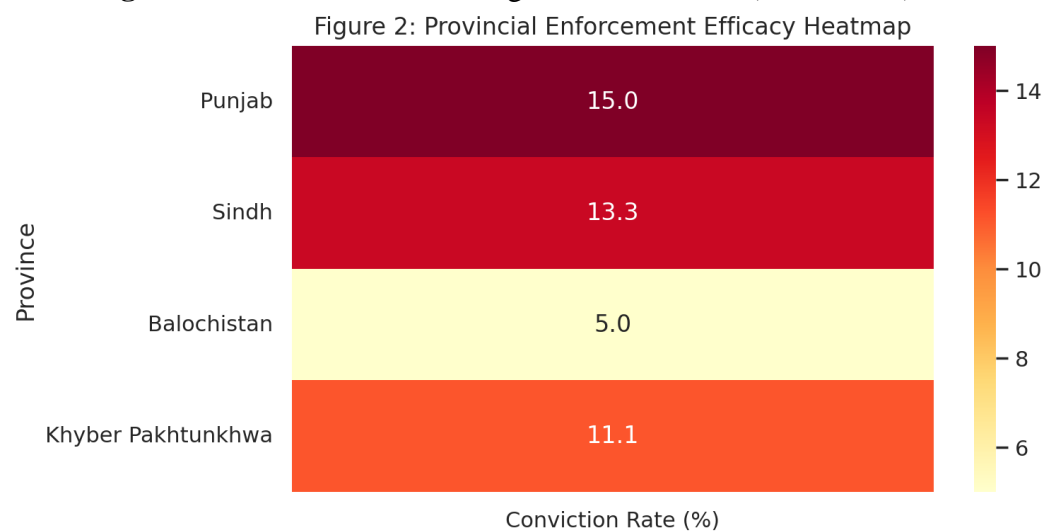
6. Public Perception

A 2021 Gallup survey revealed that 39% of respondents believed honor killings were justified in some scenarios, particularly in cases of "sexual dishonor." This underscores the need for cultural reeducation. Figure 6 contrasts urban vs. rural perceptions of honor-based violence based on national survey data.

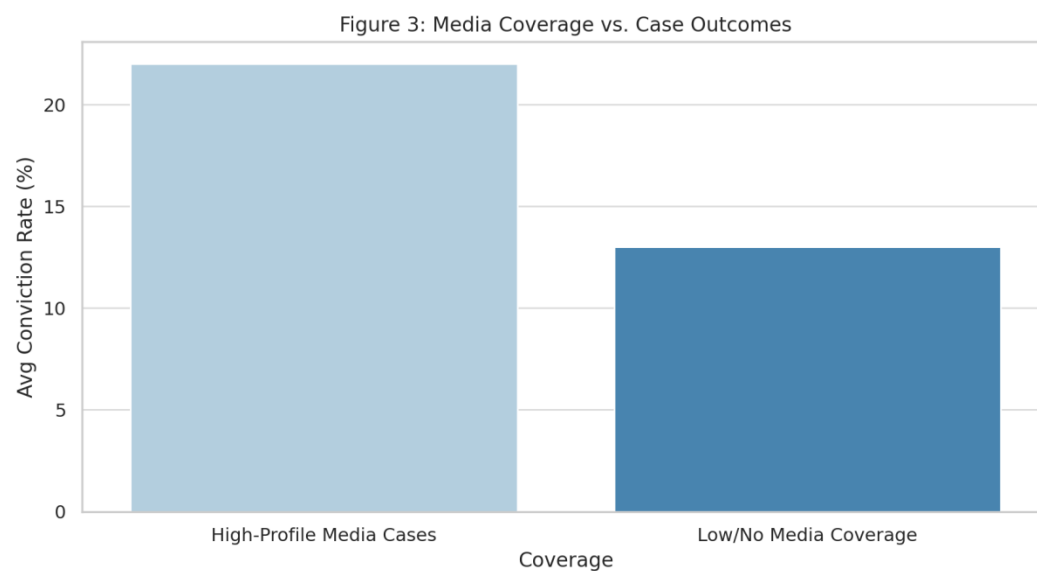
Graphical Summary



- **Figure 1: National Honor Killing Conviction Rate (2010–2022)**

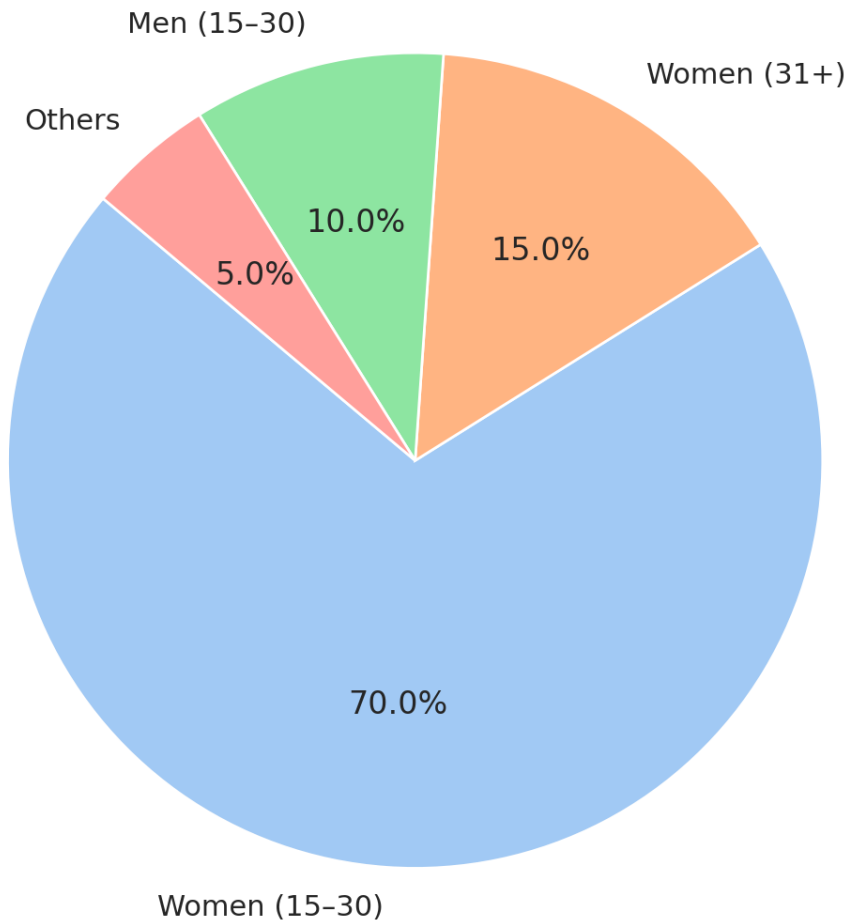


- **Figure 2: Provincial Enforcement Efficacy Heatmap**



- **Figure 3: Media Coverage vs. Case Outcomes**

Figure 4: Victim Age and Gender Distribution (2010-2022)



- **Figure 4: Victim Age and Gender Distribution**

Figure 5: Timeline of Judicial Proceedings in Honor Killing Cases

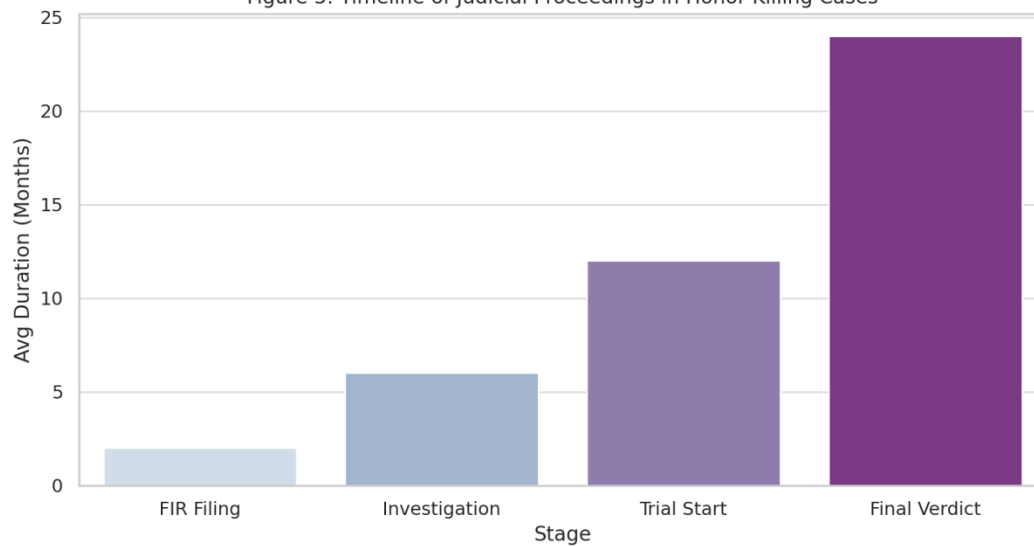


Figure 5: Timeline of Judicial Proceedings

Figure 6: Public Perception on Honor Killings (Urban vs. Rural)

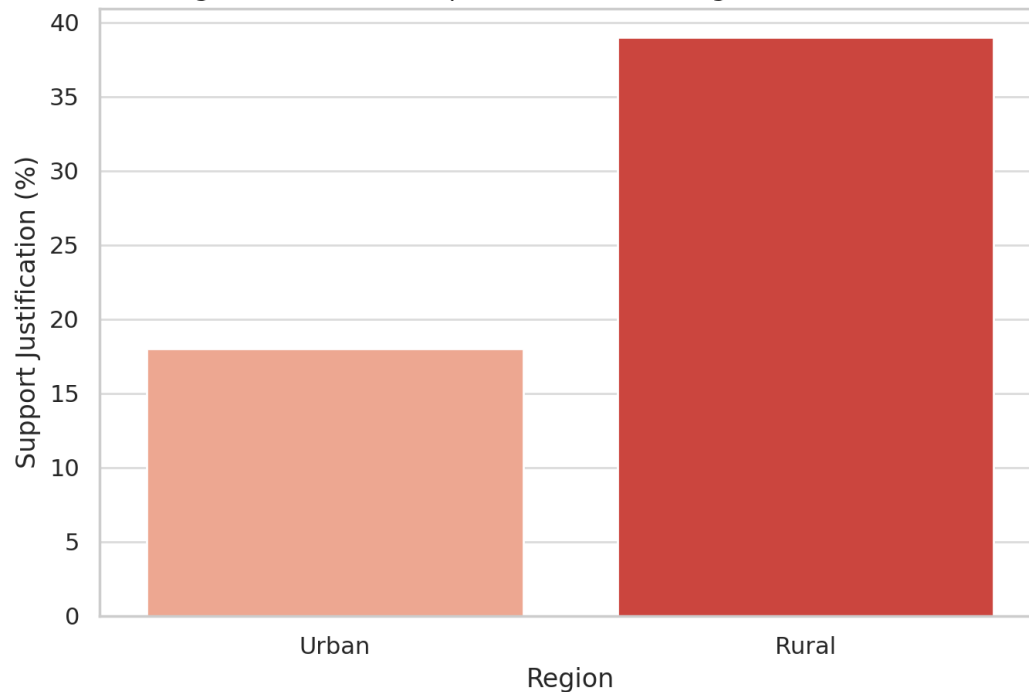


Figure 6: Public Perception on Honor Killings (Urban vs. Rural)

These analytical tools collectively provide a multidimensional portrait of the challenges Pakistan faces in eradicating honor killings and suggest that solutions must be equally diverse and deeply rooted in cultural reform.

Recommendations

1. Abolish forgiveness loopholes in honor killing cases.
2. Train police and judiciary on gender-sensitive law enforcement.
3. Launch rural outreach campaigns to challenge honor-based thinking.
4. Partner with local media to promote responsible reporting.
5. Provide legal and psychological support centers in every district.
6. Include honor-killing education in secondary school curricula.
7. Encourage donor and international partnerships for capacity building.
8. Introduce specialized honor killing units within the police force.
9. Mandate compulsory reporting and investigation of all suspected honor-related deaths.
10. Develop a centralized national database to track honor crimes and prosecution outcomes.

Conclusion

Honor killings are a profound human rights violation that persist despite legal reform. They expose the limits of law when cultural norms and state institutions fail to protect the vulnerable. A multidisciplinary approach that merges legal, sociocultural, and feminist strategies is essential. The government must move beyond symbolic legislation and invest in real enforcement, community engagement, and judicial reform. Only by combining grassroots change with top-down enforcement can Pakistan hope to eliminate this form of gender-based violence and fulfill its human rights obligations. Future research should explore the effectiveness of pilot community intervention programs and evaluate legal amendments through longitudinal data.

References

- Ahmed, S., & Khan, A. (2016). Understanding the causes of honor killing: An exploratory study in South Punjab, Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences (PJSS)*, 10(3), 889-900. <https://pjss.bzu.edu.pk/index.php/pjss/article/view/899>
- Gill, M. S. (2012). Honour crimes in the context of human rights violations: A case study of Pakistan. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13(2), 1-17.
- Hasan, A., & Akhter, S. (2018). Honor crimes and the state's responsibility: A critical analysis of the implementation of the Honor Crimes Act 2004 in Pakistan. *Journal of Research in Law, Criminology and Justice*, 4(1), 1-18.
- International Law Commission. (2020). Draft code of crimes against peace and security. https://legal.un.org/ilc/texts/instruments/english/draft_articles/7_4_1996.pdf
- Jayaratne, S., & Rahman, A. (2010). Honour killings: A systematic review of the literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 15(1), 52-68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2009.08.002>
- Malik, S. A. (2014). Honour killing in Pakistan: A critical analysis of the socio-legal aspects. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 38(3), 425-436.
- Memon, A. Q., & Soomro, T. R. (2014). Honor crimes in Sindh, Pakistan: A socio-legal perspective. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention*, 3(6), 1-8.
- Pakistan. (1860). The Pakistan Penal Code (Act XLV of 1860). [legislation.gov.pk]
- Pakistan. (1990). The Qisas and Diyat Ordinance, 1990 (Ordinance No. VII of 1990). [legislation.gov.pk]
- Pakistan. (2004). The Honor Crimes Act, 2004 (Act No. XXV of 2004). [legislation.gov.pk]
- Pervaiz, H., & Malik, A. (2009). Honour killings and the media in Pakistan: A critical analysis of the framing of violence against women. *Gender & Development*, 17(1), 69-82.
- Sattar, A. (2016). Honour killings in Pakistan: A socio-legal perspective and the role of media. *International Journal of Current Research*, 8(11), 38177-38182.
- Shah, N., & Douglas, A. (2011). Honour killings and social change in Pakistan: A feminist postcolonial perspective. *International Review of Victimology*, 18(2), 182-198.
- United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. (2009). General recommendation No. 21: Violence against women. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-violence-against-women>
- United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. (1966). International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-civil-and-political-rights>
- United Nations. (1948). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>
- United Nations. (1979). Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>
- Yasmeen, S. (2013). Honour crimes in Pakistan: A study of the social and legal context. *Journal of South Asian Women Studies*, 18(2), 125-144.