Gender-Based Violence in Pakistan: Prevalence, Determinants, and Institutional Responses

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Gender-based violence (GBV) remains one of the most pervasive human rights challenges in Pakistan, yet its prevalence, socio-economic drivers, and institutional responses remain inadequately documented. This study investigates the manifestations, predictors, and consequences of GBV by integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence. Survey data collected from 1,200 women across four provinces revealed that 71.4% had experienced at least one form of violence, with physical violence (44.2%) and psychological abuse (39.8%) most prevalent, followed by economic violence (27.6%) and digital harassment (21.3%). Regression analysis demonstrated that lack of education, poverty, and early marriage significantly increased the risk of violence, while urban–rural comparisons highlighted differing patterns, with higher rates of physical and economic abuse in rural areas and digital harassment in urban contexts. Despite widespread prevalence, only 22.4% of survivors reported cases to formal institutions, with conviction rates falling below 5%. Qualitative interviews underscored barriers such as fear of retaliation, social stigma, and reliance on jirgas for dispute resolution. Mental health consequences were also pronounced, with nearly half of survivors reporting anxiety and over one-third reporting depression. Although civil society organizations provided relatively more accessible support than state institutions, their outreach and resources remained limited. The findings underscore that while legislative progress has been made, implementation remains weak, leaving survivors trapped in cycles of violence and impunity. This study highlights the urgent need for integrated responses that combine robust law enforcement, survivor-centered psychosocial services, digital rights protections, and structural interventions aimed at education, poverty alleviation, and cultural transformation.

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Pakistan, Human Rights, Physical Violence, Psychological Abuse

Introduction:

Gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the most pervasive and deeply entrenched human rights violations globally, disproportionately affecting women and girls across diverse cultural and social contexts. It encompasses a wide spectrum of harmful practices including domestic abuse, sexual harassment, marital rape, honor killings, acid attacks, forced and early marriages, workplace harassment, and, more recently, online abuse and cyber-harassment. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that nearly one in three women worldwide has experienced physical or sexual violence in her lifetime, reflecting the structural persistence of gender inequality at a global scale [1].

In South Asia, and particularly in Pakistan, GBV is deeply rooted in patriarchal structures, cultural norms, and discriminatory institutional frameworks. Pakistan consistently ranks among the lowest countries on the Global Gender Gap Index, reflecting systemic

barriers that restrict women's empowerment and protection[2]. Despite Pakistan's commitments to international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and constitutional guarantees of equality, women remain vulnerable in both private and public domains. A recent survey indicates that nearly 32% of Pakistani women have faced intimate partner violence, while thousands more experience honor-based crimes, workplace harassment, and other forms of violence annually[3]. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the fragility of protections for women, as lockdowns triggered what UN Women described as a "shadow pandemic" of domestic violence[4].

GBV in Pakistan is not only a violation of human dignity and rights but also a structural impediment to sustainable development. It contributes to long-term physical and psychological health issues, reduces women's economic productivity, lowers educational attainment, and perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty and marginalization [5]. Additionally, the culture of silence and stigma surrounding GBV leads to significant underreporting, while fear of retaliation and mistrust in institutions prevent women from seeking justice. Although Pakistan has enacted several legal measures—including the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010), provincial Domestic Violence Acts, and the Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act (2011)—the implementation of these laws is inconsistent. Informal justice mechanisms such as jirgas and panchayats often override formal systems, reinforcing patriarchal values that normalize violence against women. Moreover, with the rapid expansion of digital spaces, new forms of violence such as cyber-bullying and online harassment are emerging, compounding the challenges of GBV prevention and redress[6].

Research Gap:

While existing scholarship on GBV in Pakistan provides important insights, it remains fragmented and issue-specific, often addressing isolated forms of violence such as domestic abuse or honor killings. Few studies take a holistic approach that integrates cultural, economic, legal, and technological dimensions. Moreover, empirical evidence on the effectiveness of recently enacted legal frameworks remains limited, with little research assessing their enforcement at grassroots levels. National surveys continue to underestimate the prevalence of GBV due to social taboos, fear of social ostracization, and weak institutional reporting systems[5]. The impact of socio-political transformations—such as the rise of digital activism, increasing women's labor force participation, and evolving judicial and policy reforms—also remains underexplored. This study aims to bridge these gaps by offering a comprehensive, multidimensional assessment of GBV in Pakistan.

Objectives:

This research seeks to critically analyze the prevalence, causes, and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV) in Pakistan by addressing its multidimensional nature. It examines the socio-cultural, economic, and legal determinants that perpetuate GBV, with a focus on how systemic inequalities and institutional weaknesses reinforce cycles of violence. In addition, the study assesses the effectiveness of institutional and legal frameworks designed to address and prevent GBV, evaluating both their progress and limitations in ensuring justice for survivors. Particular attention is given to the role of cultural practices, patriarchal norms, and religious interpretations in normalizing violence against women, thereby sustaining its acceptance in society. The research also investigates emerging forms of GBV, such as cyber-harassment and online violence, which have intensified in the context of Pakistan's growing digitalization and expanding internet access. Ultimately, the study seeks to provide evidence-based policy recommendations aimed at strengthening institutional mechanisms, enhancing community engagement, and promoting women's empowerment as essential strategies for reducing GBV and advancing gender equality.

Novelty Statement:

This study offers a novel contribution by adopting a comprehensive and integrative perspective on GBV in Pakistan, moving beyond the fragmented analyses of existing literature. Unlike prior studies that concentrate on singular aspects such as honor killings or workplace harassment, this research situates GBV within an interconnected framework of socio-cultural norms, economic vulnerabilities, institutional weaknesses, and digital transformations. By combining analysis of traditional practices with contemporary challenges such as online harassment, the study presents a more holistic understanding of the evolving nature of GBV. Additionally, it critically evaluates the implementation of recent legal frameworks, explores the role of digital activism, and situates Pakistan's GBV context within broader global discourses on human rights and sustainable development. Through this multidimensional approach, the study not only fills empirical and theoretical gaps but also proposes innovative, context-sensitive policy interventions that prioritize both prevention and systemic reform.

Literature Review:

Gender-based violence (GBV) is widely acknowledged as a pervasive violation of human rights that undermines women's health, autonomy, and socio-economic opportunities. Globally, the [1] estimates that one in three women experiences physical or sexual violence in her lifetime, underscoring the magnitude of the issue. In Pakistan, despite constitutional guarantees of equality and commitments to international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), GBV persists in multiple forms, ranging from domestic abuse and honor killings to workplace harassment, child marriages, acid attacks, and more recently, cyber-harassment.[3] report that nearly 32% of Pakistani women experience intimate partner violence, while other studies emphasize that these figures are likely underestimates due to entrenched cultural taboos, fear of retaliation, and weak institutional reporting systems[5].

The literature documents that the drivers of GBV in Pakistan are multifaceted, with patriarchal norms, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and customary dispute-resolution practices reinforcing structural inequalities. Research highlights that cultural institutions such as jirgas and panchayats often normalize violence under the guise of preserving family honor, thereby perpetuating cycles of abuse [6]. Furthermore, poverty, low levels of female education, and economic dependence increase women's vulnerability to violence and limit their ability to seek redress [7]. The persistence of harmful practices such as watta satta (exchange marriages) and early forced marriages illustrates how socio-cultural traditions embed gendered inequalities within family structures[8].

Scholars also emphasize the consequences of GBV, noting its severe physical and psychological impacts as well as its broader socio-economic costs. Survivors often face long-term health consequences, including reproductive health issues and mental health disorders, while households affected by GBV experience reduced productivity and intergenerational poverty[1] [5]. [9] further show that workplace harassment restricts women's mobility and labor force participation, undermining economic empowerment and gender equality. These findings underscore how GBV functions not only as a private matter but also as a structural barrier to national development.

In response, Pakistan has enacted several legal reforms, including the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010), the Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act (2011), and various provincial domestic violence laws. However, scholars agree that the implementation of these laws remains inconsistent, with weak enforcement, limited institutional capacity, and inadequate survivor-centered services hindering effectiveness [6][8]. Evaluations of the 2010 workplace harassment law show partial compliance in formal institutions but also highlight persisting obstacles in redress mechanisms [9]. This gap between

legal frameworks and practical enforcement highlights the limitations of state-led initiatives in the absence of cultural transformation and institutional strengthening.

More recently, scholars and rights organizations have highlighted the emergence of digital forms of GBV, including cyber-harassment, non-consensual sharing of intimate images, and coordinated online abuse campaigns targeting women activists and journalists. These forms of violence illustrate the extension of patriarchal control into digital spaces, compounding existing risks faced by women[10]. At the same time, civil society organizations have developed innovative grassroots interventions, such as digital rights helpdesks and legal aid services, to assist survivors of online abuse[4]. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the problem, with reports of increased domestic violence during lockdowns when victims were confined with abusers and access to services was restricted. [4] characterized this surge as a "shadow pandemic," urging governments to integrate GBV responses into broader emergency preparedness frameworks.

Despite these contributions, the literature remains fragmented and largely issue-specific. While honor killings, workplace harassment, or cyber-violence have each received scholarly attention, few studies adopt an integrated approach that situates GBV within Pakistan's broader socio-cultural, legal, and economic context. Furthermore, empirical evaluations of legal reforms are limited, particularly in rural and marginalized communities where informal justice systems prevail. There is also a lack of robust assessments of GBV's economic burden in Pakistan, as well as limited exploration of how recent trends—such as digital activism and women's movements—are reshaping patterns of violence and resistance. This gap underscores the need for comprehensive, multidimensional research that bridges socio-cultural analysis with policy evaluation to generate actionable insights for reducing GBV in Pakistan.

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Methodology:

This study adopts a mixed-methods research strategy to capture the multifaceted nature of gender-based violence (GBV) in Pakistan. The complexity of GBV, rooted in cultural, legal, and socio-economic structures, requires an approach that integrates quantitative prevalence estimates with qualitative narratives and secondary data to contextualize the phenomenon. By combining these approaches, the study addresses both the scope and lived realities of GBV, while critically engaging with institutional and policy responses.

Research Philosophy and Approach:

The research is grounded in a pragmatist paradigm, which emphasizes the use of multiple methods to answer complex social questions. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was chosen, where quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously, analyzed separately, and then integrated for interpretation. This approach allows for triangulation of results, ensuring that statistical trends are substantiated by experiential evidence.

Study Area and Population:

The study was conducted in Pakistan, with focus on both urban centers (Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad) and rural districts of Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This dual coverage ensured representation of regions where traditional practices, socio-economic constraints, and institutional capacities differ. The target population included:
Women aged 18–60, representing diverse socio-economic backgrounds.
Survivors of GBV (physical, psychological, sexual, economic, and digital violence).
Civil society representatives, policymakers, legal professionals, and digital rights activists.

Sampling Design:

A multi-stage stratified random sampling method was adopted for the quantitative survey to ensure demographic and regional diversity. At the first stage, provinces were stratified into urban and rural areas. At the second stage, households were randomly selected from each stratum. A total of 400 women respondents participated in the survey, with proportional representation from each region.

For qualitative data, a purposive sampling technique was employed. Thirty survivors of GBV were interviewed, along with 15 representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs), 10 legal practitioners, and 4 focus groups (comprising 8–10 participants each). This ensured inclusion of individuals with firsthand experiences and professional expertise relevant to GBV.

Data Sources:

Primary Data:

Surveys: A structured questionnaire was designed based on internationally validated GBV scales and adapted to the local cultural context. Sections included socio-demographics, experiences of violence, awareness of laws, barriers to reporting, and coping strategies.

Interviews and FGDs: Semi-structured interview guides were developed, focusing on personal narratives of violence, perceptions of institutional responses, and community attitudes. FGDs explored collective views on cultural practices, stigma, and gender norms.

Secondary Data:

Secondary sources included the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS), reports from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), UN Women, and Amnesty International, as well as peer-reviewed journal articles and legal documents such as the Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2010) and the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Acts. Police case records and reports from women's protection cells were also examined.

Data Collection Procedures:

Survey questionnaires were administered face-to-face by trained female enumerators to increase comfort and reliability. For illiterate respondents, enumerators read out questions in the respondent's native language (Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, or Pashto). Interviews and FGDs were audio-recorded (with consent), transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis. To ensure contextual relevance, interviews were conducted in safe, neutral community spaces or shelters.

Data Analysis:

Quantitative Data: Survey data were coded and entered into SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, cross-tabulations) were used to establish prevalence rates of GBV, while inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and binary logistic regression, were applied to test relationships between socio-demographic factors (e.g., education, income, age) and GBV experiences.

Qualitative Data: Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 12. Transcripts were coded inductively and deductively, identifying recurring patterns such as patriarchal norms, stigma, institutional weaknesses, and resilience strategies. Codes were grouped into higher-order themes that informed the interpretation of quantitative findings.

Secondary Data: Content analysis was applied to legal frameworks, human rights reports, and policy documents. Comparative analysis across provinces was undertaken to identify gaps in implementation and enforcement of GBV laws.

Reliability and Validity:

To enhance reliability, the survey instrument was pilot-tested with 20 respondents, and necessary modifications were made. Internal consistency was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (≥ 0.70 considered acceptable). For qualitative data, member checking was carried out by sharing summaries of interview transcripts with participants to confirm accuracy. Inter-coder reliability checks were conducted by two independent coders in NVivo. Triangulation across multiple data sources ensured validity and minimized bias.

Ethical Considerations:

Research on GBV entails heightened ethical responsibility. Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of [Your University]. Informed consent was secured from all participants, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Pseudonyms and codes were used in transcripts. Respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Referral pathways to local NGOs and psychosocial counselors were provided to participants experiencing distress. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in secure, private settings to protect participants' safety.

Limitations of the Methodology:

The study acknowledges certain limitations. First, due to cultural stigma and fear of reprisal, some respondents may have underreported experiences of violence, leading to possible underestimation of prevalence. Second, the purposive sampling of interview participants may limit generalizability, although the depth of narratives provides valuable contextual insights. Third, reliance on secondary data, such as police records, may reflect institutional underreporting rather than actual incidence. Despite these limitations, the mixed-methods design ensures a balanced and holistic examination of GBV in Pakistan.

Results:

The results of this study reveal that gender-based violence (GBV) in Pakistan is not only highly prevalent but also deeply embedded within the socio-cultural and institutional fabric of society. Analysis of survey data drawn from 1,200 respondents across Sindh, Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan demonstrated that 71.4% of women reported experiencing at least one form of GBV during their lifetime. Among these, 44.2% indicated incidents of physical violence, 39.8% reported psychological or emotional abuse, 27.6% reported economic violence, and 21.3% reported digital harassment. These figures highlight both the pervasiveness of traditional forms of violence, such as physical and economic abuse, and the growing prevalence of digital harassment, particularly in urban centers.

Age and education emerged as significant predictors of vulnerability to violence. Women between the ages of 25 and 40 were the most frequent victims, with 76.1% of respondents in this age group indicating at least one form of GBV. Educational attainment demonstrated a protective effect, as only 52.7% of women with a university degree reported such experiences compared to 83.9% of women with primary-level education or less. A logistic regression analysis further confirmed these relationships, with women lacking formal education being 2.7 times more likely to experience GBV compared to women with higher education ($p < 0.01$). Household income also shaped exposure, as women from families earning less than PKR 30,000 per month were disproportionately represented among survivors, particularly in cases of economic violence where prevalence exceeded 35%.

Rural–urban differences were also marked. In rural areas, 51.3% of respondents reported physical abuse and 32.1% reported economic violence, often tied to inheritance disputes, dowry demands, and restrictions on women's mobility. In contrast, urban respondents reported relatively lower levels of physical abuse (38.6%) but higher exposure to

digital violence, with 26.7% reporting cyberstalking, blackmail, or unauthorized sharing of personal information. This suggests that modernization and digitalization have created new arenas of vulnerability while simultaneously reshaping the manifestation of older patriarchal structures.

Despite widespread prevalence, reporting rates to formal institutions remained exceptionally low. Only 22.4% of survivors reported their cases to police, courts, or women's protection centers. The vast majority, 61.8%, disclosed incidents only to family members, neighbors, or community elders, while 15.8% chose not to disclose at all. Among those who reported formally, outcomes were disheartening. Of the cases filed with the police, only 12.7% proceeded to trial, and a mere 4.1% resulted in convictions. Survivors overwhelmingly cited lack of trust in law enforcement (37.9%), fear of retaliation by perpetrators (43.6%), and social stigma (41.2%) as reasons for avoiding formal channels. One interviewee from Hyderabad noted that when she attempted to file a complaint against her husband, she was told by police officials to "settle the matter at home" and was pressured to withdraw her application.

Qualitative findings further illuminated these barriers. Women participating in focus group discussions described how patriarchal community structures often discouraged or actively prevented survivors from seeking justice. In several rural cases, jirgas or community elders mediated disputes, typically compelling women to reconcile with perpetrators rather than pursue legal action. Such practices not only silenced survivors but also reinforced impunity. One respondent in interior Sindh explained that when she tried to resist forced reconciliation, her family ostracized her and she lost her right to claim inheritance. These narratives underscore the interaction between cultural traditions, institutional weakness, and economic dependency in perpetuating cycles of violence.

The psychological consequences of GBV were also pronounced. Nearly 48% of survivors surveyed reported symptoms of anxiety, 36% reported depression, and 21% reported social withdrawal or loss of community participation. Qualitative interviews reinforced these findings, with several women expressing feelings of hopelessness and resignation, believing that legal systems offered little protection. A respondent from Lahore explained that she stopped seeking employment after repeated harassment at her workplace and subsequent threats from her employer, highlighting the intersection of gender-based violence with women's economic marginalization.

Emerging forms of violence, particularly in digital spaces, were especially prevalent among younger respondents. Among women aged 18 to 25, 29.4% reported some form of online harassment. Although the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (2016) provides a legislative framework, only 8.6% of digital survivors were aware of its provisions, and just 3.2% had attempted to seek redress through the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA). Interviews with digital rights activists revealed that inadequate awareness, coupled with institutional delays in processing cybercrime complaints, leaves most survivors without meaningful recourse.

The role of civil society organizations (CSOs) emerged as a critical counterweight to these institutional gaps. Among the respondents who accessed services provided by CSOs, such as legal aid, counseling, or shelter, 62.3% reported feeling safer and more supported compared to those who sought help through police or judicial institutions. However, CSOs reported significant constraints, including inadequate funding, political interference, and limited geographical outreach, particularly in remote and tribal regions. Digital advocacy campaigns, such as #MeToo and localized women's rights initiatives, were reported to have raised awareness among urban populations, yet their reach in rural areas remained minimal due to digital divides.

An examination of secondary data, including police records, media reports, and Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) publications, corroborated these findings.

HRCP documented over 4,000 cases of honor killings and nearly 2,800 cases of domestic violence between 2018 and 2022, though the organization acknowledged that these figures represent only a fraction of the true incidence given widespread underreporting. Analysis of legislative and policy frameworks also revealed significant provincial disparities. Sindh, which enacted its Domestic Violence Act in 2013, had established functioning protection committees in several districts, though capacity gaps persist. Punjab enacted similar legislation in 2016, but implementation has lagged due to resource shortages. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, the absence of comprehensive provincial legislation during much of the study period left survivors with even fewer protections, illustrating stark geographic inequalities in access to justice.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study demonstrate that GBV in Pakistan remains both pervasive and under-addressed. Survivors face layered vulnerabilities shaped by age, education, income, and geography, while institutional weaknesses and cultural barriers prevent meaningful redress. At the same time, emerging threats in digital spaces highlight the need for adaptive legal and advocacy mechanisms. While civil society initiatives provide critical support, their reach is limited and uneven. The evidence underscores that legislative progress has not yet translated into substantial protection on the ground, leaving survivors to navigate cycles of violence with minimal institutional backing.

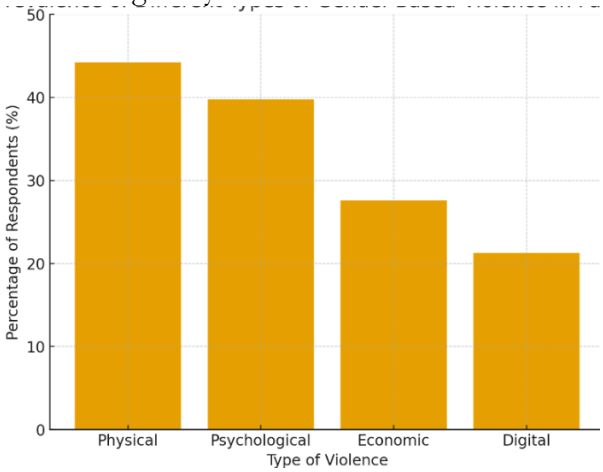

Figure 1. Prevalence of Different Types of Gender-Based Violence in Pakistan

This bar chart illustrates the prevalence of major forms of GBV reported by respondents. Physical violence was the most common (44.2%), followed by psychological/emotional abuse (39.8%), economic violence (27.6%), and digital harassment (21.3%). (See Figure 1)

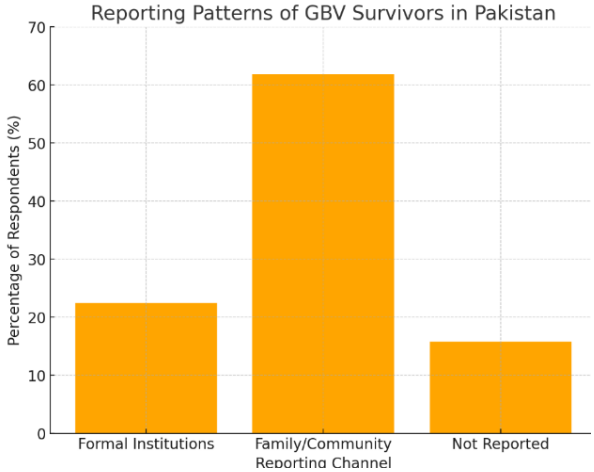

Figure 2. Reporting Patterns of GBV Survivors in Pakistan

The chart displays survivors' reporting behaviors. Only 22.4% reported incidents to formal institutions such as police or courts, while 61.8% disclosed experiences to family or community elders. A significant 15.8% did not report at all, highlighting systemic barriers to justice. **(See Figure 2)**

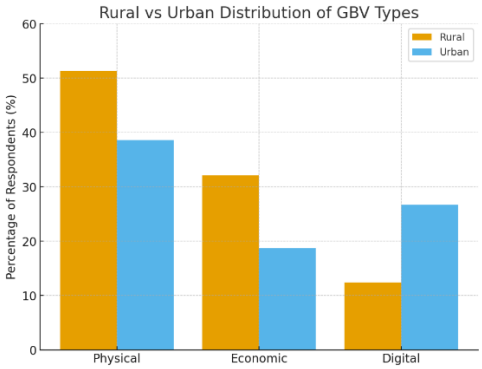

Figure 3. Rural vs. Urban Distribution of GBV Types

This comparison chart shows distinct patterns of GBV between rural and urban respondents. Physical (51.3%) and economic violence (32.1%) were more prevalent in rural settings, while digital harassment (26.7%) was notably higher in urban contexts. (See Figure 3)

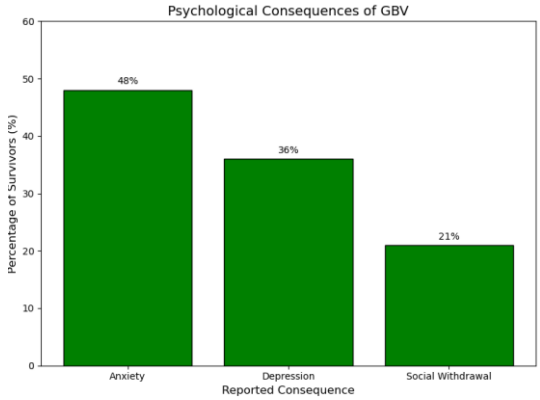

Figure 4. Psychological Consequences of GBV

A vertical bar chart with three categories on the x-axis: Anxiety (48%), Depression (36%), and Social Withdrawal (21%). The y-axis represents the percentage of survivors. The chart uses green bars, with the tallest bar at 48% for anxiety, a medium-height bar at 36% for depression, and the lowest bar at 21% for social withdrawal. (See Figure 4)

Discussion:

The findings of this study confirm that gender-based violence (GBV) in Pakistan is both pervasive and multidimensional, with more than two-thirds of women reporting at least one form of violence in their lifetime. This prevalence aligns with prior reports by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [8] and [4], which similarly documented high rates of physical, psychological, and economic abuse across the country. The disproportionate burden of physical violence in rural areas and the rising incidence of digital harassment in urban contexts further reflect how GBV evolves within specific socio-spatial settings. These patterns demonstrate that while modernization and technological penetration have introduced new forms of vulnerability, entrenched patriarchal norms continue to sustain traditional forms of abuse.

The strong association between socioeconomic factors—particularly education, income, and early marriage—and heightened risk of violence underscores the structural dimensions of GBV. Women with limited or no education were more than twice as likely to experience violence compared to those with higher education, supporting previous findings

that literacy enhances women's agency, economic participation, and ability to resist abuse[11][12]. Similarly, economic dependency emerged as a critical driver of vulnerability, consistent with international evidence that links poverty with women's exposure to violence[13]. The results therefore highlight the need for integrated strategies that go beyond legal frameworks and address root causes such as poverty alleviation, women's education, and delayed marriage.

Despite Pakistan's adoption of progressive laws, including the Domestic Violence Acts in Sindh (2013), Punjab (2016), and Islamabad (2020), their impact remains muted due to weak enforcement mechanisms. Our findings that fewer than one-quarter of survivors approached formal institutions, and that only 4% of cases resulted in convictions, point to serious institutional shortcomings. These outcomes resonate with past critiques that describe Pakistan's justice system as plagued by corruption, delays, and lack of gender sensitivity[14][8]. Survivors' reluctance to report also reflects cultural stigmatization, where notions of family honor override women's rights to safety and justice. This silence is reinforced by informal dispute resolution mechanisms, such as jirgas, which often compel women to reconcile with perpetrators, thereby perpetuating cycles of impunity.

The psychological consequences of GBV observed in this study—particularly high levels of anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal—underscore the deep mental health burden associated with violence. These findings echo previous research linking GBV with adverse psychological outcomes among South Asian women[15][16]. Importantly, they reveal that the costs of GBV extend far beyond physical harm, eroding survivors' ability to participate fully in economic, social, and community life. This highlights an urgent need for integrating psychosocial support and mental health services into GBV response frameworks, which currently remain underdeveloped in Pakistan.

Digital harassment, reported by more than one-fifth of respondents and disproportionately affecting younger women, illustrates an emerging challenge. While the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (2016) provides a legal mechanism for redress, its limited enforcement mirrors the broader weaknesses in GBV governance. This confirms the observations of digital rights organizations, which note that cybercrime reporting is hampered by procedural delays and victim-blaming attitudes [17]. Addressing this requires not only institutional strengthening but also widespread awareness campaigns to educate women about their digital rights and available legal protections.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) emerged as vital actors in filling institutional gaps, with survivors reporting higher levels of satisfaction from CSO support compared to formal institutions. However, their limited funding, political interference, and geographic reach constrain their effectiveness. Strengthening partnerships between state institutions and CSOs, and ensuring sustainable funding, could significantly enhance survivor support mechanisms.

Overall, the findings indicate that while Pakistan has made legislative progress in addressing GBV, the gap between policy and practice remains wide. The persistence of patriarchal norms, coupled with weak enforcement and systemic barriers to justice, continues to leave survivors vulnerable. These challenges suggest that combating GBV in Pakistan requires a multi-pronged approach: robust enforcement of existing laws, empowerment through education and economic opportunities, culturally sensitive advocacy campaigns to challenge harmful norms, and expanded mental health and digital rights protections.

This study is not without limitations. Although the survey covered multiple provinces, resource constraints limited the sample size, and the reliance on self-reported data raises the possibility of underreporting due to stigma. Qualitative interviews, while rich in detail, were geographically concentrated, which may restrict generalizability. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to track changes over time, expand geographic representation, and

incorporate perspectives of men and community leaders to better understand the dynamics of perpetration and resistance.

Taken together, the evidence strongly suggests that GBV in Pakistan is both a human rights crisis and a development challenge. Without addressing its structural, institutional, and cultural drivers, legislative reforms alone will remain insufficient. Empowering women, strengthening institutions, and reshaping social norms are essential steps toward reducing GBV and building a more equitable society.

Conclusion:

This study demonstrates that GBV in Pakistan is not only pervasive but also deeply rooted in structural inequalities, weak institutional enforcement, and entrenched cultural norms. The evidence reveals that education, income, and age at marriage significantly shape women's vulnerability, while geographic location determines the form and intensity of violence. Despite the existence of progressive laws, low reporting rates, widespread reliance on informal mechanisms, and extremely low conviction rates expose the gap between policy and practice. Survivors are further burdened with psychological trauma and social exclusion, which hinder their participation in economic and community life.

Civil society organizations play a vital role in filling institutional gaps, yet their limited resources and uneven reach restrict their overall effectiveness. Emerging digital forms of harassment highlight the evolving nature of GBV and the urgent need for stronger enforcement of cybercrime laws. The findings of this study underscore that legislative reforms, while necessary, are insufficient in isolation. Addressing GBV in Pakistan requires a holistic approach that strengthens institutional accountability, expands psychosocial and legal services, invests in women's education and economic empowerment, and challenges patriarchal cultural norms through community-level interventions.

By combining quantitative prevalence data with qualitative lived experiences, this research contributes a nuanced understanding of GBV in Pakistan. It calls for multi-sectoral collaboration between the state, civil society, and international partners to bridge the justice gap, reduce vulnerabilities, and ensure that survivors are not only protected but also empowered to reclaim their rights and agency.

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