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Violence Against Women: A Human Issue, Not a “Pakistani Culture” Problem

By ISLAMABAD BRAZILIAN JIU JITSU.

The Numbers Tell Us Something Clear

Violence against women is not confined to any one country, faith, or culture—it is a **human crisis**.

- **Globally:** 1 in 3 women (736 million) experience sexual or physical violence in their lifetime (WHO/UN Women).
- **Western democracies:**
 - In the U.S., over **22 victims per 1,000 people aged 12+ face sexual violence annually**.
 - Australia recorded a **31-year high in sexual assaults in 2023**.
 - In Canada, only **156 out of every 1,000 sexual assault reports lead to conviction**.
- **South Asia:**
 - India registered **31,500 rapes in 2022**.
 - Sri Lanka reported **130,000+ domestic violence cases in 2024**.
 - Bangladesh and Nepal track rising cases of rape and attempted rape annually.
- **Pakistan:**
 - The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) recorded **405 honour killings in 2024**.
 - In January 2025 alone, **57 honour killing incidents** were reported.

The data shows us something indisputable: **violence against women is a universal problem, not a Pakistani one.**

Why Does Media Frame It as “Pakistani Culture”?

Despite these global parallels, international media often frames violence in Pakistan as a **cultural pathology**.

- **Culturalisation & Orientalism (Volpp, Gill & Brah):**
Honour killings and gender violence are essentialised as “Muslim” or “Eastern” traits—while similar violence in the West is blamed on “individual pathology” or “systemic failures.”
- **Rescue Narratives (Abu-Lughod):**
Pakistani/Muslim women are portrayed as passive victims waiting to be rescued, sidelining local reformers, lawyers, activists, and survivors who fight daily for justice.

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- **The Double Standard:**
A rape in London is a *justice system failure*.
A rape in Lahore is *Pakistani culture*.
Same harm, different excuse.

The Psychology Behind These Narratives

To understand why these frames persist, we need to look at them through three lenses:

1. First-Person (Media Narrator / Reporter)

- **Cognitive shortcuts:** Reporters use vivid cultural labels because they are memorable.
- **Orientalist bias:** The East is portrayed as “backward,” reinforcing colonial stereotypes.
- **Moral distancing:** Framing violence as “theirs” shields Western societies from facing their own prevalence.
- **Savior complex:** Portraying Muslim women as needing rescue provides moral gratification.

2. Second-Person (Audience / Reader)

- **Confirmation bias:** Readers interpret stories in line with existing stereotypes.
- **Social identity:** Western audiences feel superior by contrasting “their progress” with “our backwardness.”
- **Fear and othering:** Violence framed as “over there” comforts people into believing it is less likely “here.”
- **Emotional pull:** Cultural frames evoke stronger outrage than dry systemic explanations.

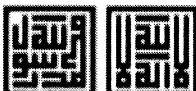
3. Third-Person (Institutions / Systems)

- **Policy convenience:** Labeling violence as “Pakistani culture” makes it a foreign policy issue, not a domestic one.
- **Geopolitical comfort:** It sustains the narrative of “modern West vs. backward East.”
- **Selective empathy:** Western women are treated as human tragedies; Pakistani women as cultural symptoms.

Pakistan’s Four Provinces: Local Practices, Global Misinterpretations

Each province has practices linked to honour-based violence—but these are **illegal under Pakistani law** and repeatedly condemned by courts:

- **Punjab & KP:** Practices like *Swara* and *Vani* (girls given to settle disputes) are outlawed as un-Islamic and unconstitutional.
- **Sindh:** *Karo-Kari* persists under feudal influence, not religion.



- **Balochistan:** *Stiahkari* is tied to tribal codes—again, not cultural inevitability but weak enforcement.

These are not “Pakistani culture”—they are **governance failures, elite capture, and justice system gaps**, just as fraternity hazing, domestic violence, or sexual assault scandals are failures of systems in the West.

Reframing the Conversation

When violence against women in Pakistan is reported, we must push back against cultural essentialism and ask:

- Why do similar cases in the West escape cultural blame?
- Why is a systemic or psychological explanation used there, but not here?
- Why are Pakistani women seen only as victims, not as leaders, activists, and agents of change?

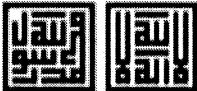
A Call to Influential Women of Pakistan

We invite you—the thinkers, leaders, entrepreneurs, lawyers, activists, and public figures of Pakistan—to join in **reframing the narrative**:

- Speak with the data: Violence against women is a **human issue with local expressions**, not a national trait.
- Challenge cultural essentialism: Honour killings are **illegal**, condemned by courts, and resisted by Pakistani reformers.
- Insist on parity: If the West frames its violence as systemic, so must ours be framed—not as culture, but as failures we can fix.

Same harm, different excuse.
It is time to claim the narrative and stand for Pakistani women not as cultural victims but as global equals in the fight against gender violence.

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