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Men, Masculinity, and Violence: A Pakistan-Focused, Human-Centered Lens

Executive Summary

Violence against women is not “Islamic,” nor is it a uniquely Pakistani cultural problem. It is a **human problem** rooted in psychology, socialization, power dynamics, and systemic gaps.

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** defines violence through four ecological levels. **Individual, relationship, community, and societal.** These same layers explain violence everywhere, from Karachi to California.

In Pakistan, large-scale studies like **Equimundo’s IMAGES survey** reveal familiar risk patterns: childhood exposure to domestic violence, economic stress, and rigid gender beliefs. These are the same human triggers found in Western societies.

Religion and law in Pakistan categorically reject “honour” violence. Parliament’s 2016 amendment mandates life imprisonment even if families forgive the killer; the **Supreme Court** has outlawed *jirgas* and *panchayats*; and both the **Council of Islamic Ideology** and the **Pakistan Ulema Council** have issued **fatwas declaring honour killings un-Islamic.**

Yet globally, a **double standard persists.** When such violence occurs in the West, it is labelled a “systemic failure” or a “psychological issue.” When it happens in Pakistan, it is framed as “culture.” The causes are **patriarchy, trauma, impunity, and rigid masculinity** which are universal. The difference lies in how they are narrated.

1. The Psychology of Male Violence

Using the WHO ecological model helps shift blame from “culture” to **human psychology and systemic failure.**

Individual Level

- **Childhood exposure:** Men who witness domestic violence are significantly more likely to become perpetrators later in life.
- **Masculinity threat:** Research across cultures shows that when a man’s sense of status or “honour” (izzat/ghairat) feels threatened, aggression rises. This mechanism is **human**, not religious.
- **Sexist beliefs:** Pakistani samples reflect a high correlation between **rape-myth acceptance** and justification of violence which are similar to findings in the U.S. and Europe.
- **Mental health:** Depression, unemployment, and substance misuse amplify aggression when combined with masculine insecurity which is a global phenomenon seen from Australia to Pakistan.

Relationship Level

- **Economic stress and control:** When men face job insecurity or when women enter the workforce, perceived loss of control can trigger violence not from culture, but from fragile masculine identity.
- **Communication breakdown:** Low emotional literacy and poor conflict-resolution skills create cycles of violence that education can interrupt.

Community Level

- **Peer permission:** Over **50% of Pakistani men** believe “a woman needs to be beaten at times.” More than **75% of married respondents** think women should tolerate abuse to “keep the family together.” These are learned social attitudes, not theology.
- **Parallel justice systems:** *Jirgas* and *feudal networks* perpetuate impunity, though the **Supreme Court** has ruled such mechanisms unconstitutional.

Societal Level

- **Impunity:** Weak evidence collection, delays, and social pressure to withdraw cases sustain perpetrators’ confidence.
- **Media “culturalisation”:** Western coverage often attributes Pakistani violence to religion or ethnicity, while treating similar crimes at home as personal or systemic failures, which is, in-turn, the psychological reflex of “othering.”

2. What the Data Says

According to **IMAGES Pakistan**, attitudes endorsing violence remain widespread:

“A third of women and more than half of men agree that a woman needs to be beaten at times; more than three-quarters of married respondents say she should tolerate violence to keep the family together.”

Violence is most prevalent among men with **lower education**, **high work stress**, and childhood trauma; not by province or faith. District differences in spousal abuse rates correlate with **poverty and enforcement**, not religion.

3. Why This Is Not About Religion or Pakistani Culture

Law and Faith Agree

- **2016 Parliament Amendment:** Life imprisonment for honour killings, even if pardoned.
- **Supreme Court:** Declared *jirgas* unconstitutional.
- **Clergy:** Multiple *fatwas* call honour killings anti-Islamic.

Comparative Evidence

The same “honour-based aggression” is documented in the **U.S. South**, **Mediterranean Europe**, and **Latin America**. The mechanism — male insecurity and status anxiety — is human, not religious.



Implementation Gap

Pakistan’s issue is not ideology; it is **enforcement**. Laws like the **Anti-Rape Act (2021)** promise progress but lack full execution, reflecting an institutional problem, not a cultural flaw.

4. What Works: Evidence-Based Interventions

- 1. **Shift norms early:** Introduce gender-transformative education, respectful-relationships curricula, and bystander training from middle school onward.
 - 2. **Address trauma and mental health:** Programs that treat **childhood trauma, addiction, and stress** reduce male violence across all societies.
 - 3. **Engage fathers:** Warm, involved fatherhood reduces aggression and fosters empathy; data from Equimundo and Australia show direct correlation.
 - 4. **Strengthen justice systems:** Fully implement **Anti-Rape Act 2021** with provisions for dedicated courts, forensic units, and transparent conviction data.
 - 5. **De-culturalize the message:** Use WHO and CDC terminology, focusing on risk factors rather than “culture,” in media and training.
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5. Key Talking Points

- **“This is not religion; it’s risk.”** Violence emerges from trauma, stress, peer permission, and impunity, seen equally in Karachi, London, and Los Angeles.
 - **“Faith leaders and courts agree.”** Honour killings are **illegal and un-Islamic**.
 - **“Fix systems, change norms.”** Enforce the law, reform institutions, and reshape social attitudes together.
 - **“Same harm, same explanation.”** Pakistan deserves the same analytical fairness that the West gives itself.
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Final Word

The data is conclusive: Pakistani men are not culturally predisposed to violence. They are products of the same human systems that produce aggression elsewhere, shaped by stress, trauma, and inequity. To reduce violence, we must stop diagnosing it as “culture” and start addressing it as **human behavior**. The solution lies not in shaming Pakistan, but in **strengthening its systems, healing its men, and empowering its women**.

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