

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN LAHORE, PAKISTAN: A CRIMINOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF HIGH-PROFILE CASES AND LEGAL RESPONSES (2020–2026)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21192143>

| Received | Accepted | Published |
|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| 24 April 2026 | 06 June 2026 | 21 June 2026 |

ABSTRACT

Sexual violence against women and children remains a serious and underreported crime in Pakistan, with Lahore serving as Punjab's principal centre for reporting, forensic examination, and prosecution of sexual offences. Major changes in the criminal justice response were aimed at strengthening the criminal justice response between 2020 and 2026, such as the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021 and the creation of Gender Based Violence (GBV) courts. This study analyzes the criminal and legal aspects of sexual violence in Lahore in this period, analyzes top cases, judicial reactions, and the effectiveness of the reforms after 2020. Secondary data obtained from legislation, Lahore High Court judgments, HRCP, WHO, UNODC, forensic medicine studies and credible media reports was used in a qualitative doctrinal case-study design. Data analysis was carried out based on the thematic and doctrinal legal analysis. The results show that institutional changes have lagged behind legal changes. There was an upsurge in reporting of rape cases, however, the conviction rate still remains low with comparatively better outcomes in specialised GBV courts. The forensic capacity is still weak, judicial follow-up is inadequate and there is still no specific data on crime in Lahore so accountability and justice continue to be hampered. The high-profile convictions illustrate that effective prosecutions can be made, but that this is an exceptional rather than representative case. The study finds that the problem of sexual violence in Lahore exists due to the issues of the weak institutions, lack of forensic resources, lack of transparency in data sharing and social stigma. It puts forward the need to build the capacity of GBV courts, develop forensic capacity and investigative capacity, protect victims and build Integrated Digital Case Management Systems to enhance justice outcomes.

Keywords: sexual violence; rape; child sexual abuse; Lahore; Anti-Rape Act 2021; GBV courts; Pakistan; feminist criminology; routine activity theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Lahore Context

Lahore, the Capital of Punjab and the second largest city in Pakistan, is not only the most institutionally developed criminal justice infrastructure city in Pakistan but also one of the most frequently mentioned cities for high-profile sexual violence cases. It is home to the provincial forensic science laboratory, Lahore High Court and a large number of police stations, GBV (Gender Based Violence) courts and Anti-Rape Crisis Cells set up in the wake of reforms in Pakistan since 2020. Lahore's close infrastructure makes it a natural location for case adjudication for the entire province and serves as a good indicator of the impact of Pakistan's post-2020 legal reforms in terms of institutional changes, especially in the space where resources have been invested the most.

Meanwhile, Lahore is the scene of some of the most reported sexual violence incidents in recent Pakistani history, including the September 2020 incident of the Sialkot-Lahore Motorway gang-rape, which sparked nationwide protests and raised international awareness, and was believed to spur the enactment of the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021. There were also more cases of youth sexual assault in the city of Lahore in following years, such as an alleged assault on a student at a college in Lahore in 2024 that led to a multi-city students' protest and a further case in 2025 involving the arrest of a suspect in Lahore who was allegedly involved in a child sexual exploitation network globally. Cases combined illustrate the visibility of sexual violence in the public discourse in Lahore and the institutional failures, including long trials, conduct of officials that blames the victim, evidentiary loss, and delayed FIR registration, that persist in spite of legislative attempts for reform.

1.2 Rise in Reported Gender-Based Violence, 2020–2026

HRCP reporting shows that the number of rape cases in Pakistan has increased significantly in the past decade with 5,279 recorded rape and 1,084 child sexual abuse cases reported nationwide in

2021 alone, which is an estimated 200 percent increase from the previous ten years; Punjab has had the highest number of cases in the province. The figures for the province of Punjab, compiled by the Sustainable Social Development Organisation (SSDO) indicate that reporting of rape cases has been volatile from around 3,914 cases in 2022 to 6,624 in 2023 and then 4,641 in 2024; figures more reflective of fluctuations in reporting behaviour, police recording practices and shifts in public interest than of any underlying change in victimisation rates. According to the separate report by Human Rights Watch, 10,365 complaints were lodged with the Punjab police for violence against women in the first four months of 2023. It is acknowledged in the publicly available sources identified for this study that these are not disaggregated to Lahore district alone, but these figures do show the scale of the problem in the province within which Lahore is the administrative and judicial centre.

1.3 Research Problem

The conviction rates for sexual offences, despite the enactment of the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021, establishment of GBV courts after a November 2019 directive from the National Judicial Policy Making Committee and the formation of Anti-Rape Crisis Cells (ARC) and Special Sexual Investigation Units (SSIU), are still abysmally low at 0.5 to 3 per cent across Pakistan and around 16 per cent within the dedicated GBV Courts. This enduring disconnect between legislation and results in prosecution is a central research theme of this study, namely the question of why, in the city with the most legal capacity to do so, robust legal reform continues to co-exist with weak outcomes in prosecutions.

1.4 Research Objectives

1. To document and analyse high-profile sexual violence cases involving women and children in Lahore between 2020 and 2026.
2. To examine the jurisprudence of the Lahore High Court and the functioning of Lahore's Gender-Based Violence courts in adjudicating sexual offence cases.

3. To assess the investigative performance of Lahore Police in sexual violence cases, including FIR registration timeliness and forensic evidence handling.
4. To evaluate the implementation of the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021 and related Punjab gender-based violence legislation in Lahore.
5. To identify institutional, cultural, and evidentiary barriers that continue to undermine victim reporting and case attrition in Lahore.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to a limited but growing body of Lahore-specific criminological and forensic literature, complementing existing hospital-based forensic-medicine research from Lahore General Hospital and King Edward Medical University with a doctrinal legal and case-study analysis of the post-2021 reform period. It is intended to be of value to criminology and law students, GBV court reform advocates, Punjab Police training authorities, and civil-society organisations engaged in victim protection and legal-aid work in Lahore.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Feminist Criminology

Feminist criminology does not focus on the individual as a deviant or the individual as a victim of sexual violence, but rather sees sexual violence as an extension of the structures of patriarchal power. While Daly and Chesney-Lind's pioneering work made a strong case that mainstream criminology had neglected to consider gender as a framing factor in both offending and victimisation, Chesney-Lind's subsequent research on "backlash" revealed how law reform policies designed to protect women have often been undermined by the institutional actors who reassert patriarchal control through discretionary practices, including victim-blaming language from police officials, informal pressure towards "compromise" settlements, and reliance on discredited virginity-testing practices. This framework is directly applicable in Lahore where the case of the Motorway became internationally notorious not just because the crime was

committed, but also due to a senior Lahore police officer's public statement that blamed the victim of the attack for going out at night without a male escort, during an incident that was often cited in Pakistani GBV literature as an example of an institutional culture of patriarchy that exists alongside formal laws and mechanisms.

2.2 Routine Activity Theory

Cohen and Felson's routine activity theory suggests that the key ingredients involved in crime are motivated offenders, suitable targets, and the absence of capable guardians in both time and place. The Motorway was often examined in this way: an isolated stretch of nighttime, unlit highway, a stranded target in the sense that it was both isolated and highly "suitable", and the complete lack of a capable guardian (no roadside assistance infrastructure, no visible policing presence) to create the spatio-temporal conditions for the crime. Felson and Boba's subsequent development of the theory into crime analysis in everyday life is helpful in understanding why in the cases of child sexual abuse in Lahore, the offenders are exploiting the normal and unsupervised environment of the children (such as madrasas, informal labour places, online places and streets) instead of directly facing them with able guardians.

2.3 Pakistan-Specific GBV Literature

At the institutional level, the scale of sexual violence has been documented and there is increasing awareness and evidence on how it is handled in Pakistan. Gillani was the first to call for a scientific knowledge base, indigenous to Pakistan, on the problem of child sexual abuse with the lack of any longitudinal data at that time. They were Sarfraz, Sarfraz, Sarfraz, and Qarnain, who authored a review article in the Bulletin of the World Health Organization, which described gender-based violence in Pakistan as a public-health emergency, calling for coordinated health-sector responses and not just criminal-justice ones. Procedural, financial and social barriers are comparable with those that were found in this study and were found by Qaisrani and Liaquat when they studied women's

access to justice mechanisms in Pakistan. Rasool and Rasool's study on practice of DNA evidence in sexual assault cases in Pakistan highlighted significant problems in the chain of custody of the DNA in such cases, which are particularly relevant to Lahore where the province's single centralised forensic laboratory is located where survivors and suspects from all over the province have to travel to access.

2.4 Court Delay Studies

A comprehensive report on the effectiveness of GBV courts in Pakistan, cited in the context, revealed that the average time taken to dispatch a case from the time of its registration of an FIR to a final order was about four months, which included more than nine months spent in the trial phase of the case. This is confirmed by Voicepk's two panel discussions with sitting and ex-Lahore based judges in 2022 and 2023, both of which revealed that GBV courts are extremely overloaded, with over 7,000 cases of sexual violence reported pending in Lahore's trial courts as of 2023.

2.5 Police Investigation Failures

These are common shortcomings in police investigation of sexual offences that have been identified by literature from Pakistan, which include delayed filing of FIR, loss of the 24-72 hour forensic evidence window, lack of a proper chain of evidence and gender insensitive interviewing. In a retrospective study of female survivors of sexual assault presented to the Department of Forensic Medicine of Lahore General Hospital for medical examination between November 2020 and November 2022, Bandesha et al. found that survivors appeared for medical examination two to seven days after the sexual assault; that only 34.4 per cent of the cases had recoverable forensic stains; and most tellingly that 92.2 per cent of the cases did not follow up after medical examination in the hospital, reflecting a significant gap between medico-legal intake and final court outcome. In a previous study, the Journal of the Pakistan Medical Association found positive findings with 123 sexual-assault cases were brought in at the

medico-legal surgeon's office in Lahore, of which 76 percent arrived more than 72 hours after the incident, and 83 percent had bathed or changed clothes prior to examination, both factors reducing the possibility of forensic recovery.

2.6 UNODC and HRC Reports

The minimum standards for victim-centred investigation outlined in UNODC's handbook on effective police responses to violence against women have been explicitly adopted in Pakistan's reform law, such as in-camera trials, video-link testimony, and prohibiting the discredited 'two-finger' virginity test (which was banned in the Lahore High Court and Sindh High Court, respectively). Despite legislative efforts, HRCP has consistently identified the reported incidence of honour crimes in Punjab (178 in 2024) and gender-based violence as structural issues that it has not been able to address effectively.

2.7 Conceptual Research Model

The conceptual research model as shown in Figure 1 depicts the theoretical relationship between the most important variables studied in this research. It is created after weaving together the ideas of Feminist Criminology and Routine Activity Theory in a way that has given a comprehensive framework for the institutional, legal, forensic, and socio-cultural factors that influence the outcome of criminal justice systems in sexual violence cases involving women and children in Lahore, Pakistan. The model is based on four independent variables: Legal Framework, Police Investigation Performance, Forensic Capacity, and Socio-Cultural Factors. These variables together affect the mediating variable (institutional effectiveness) which is the efficiency of policing, judicial procedures, prosecution and victim protection mechanisms. Better institutional effectiveness should translate to better performance of the criminal justice system overall, which should include greater rates of reporting, better rates of prosecution, higher conviction rates, faster justice and greater satisfaction of victims. The framework also recognizes that Feminist Criminology, which aims to identify how patriarchy, gender inequality,

and institutional discrimination contribute to women and children's vulnerability to sexual violence, and Routine Activity Theory which focuses on how opportunities for sexual victimization emerge when a "motivated offender," a "suitable target," and a "lack of capable guardian" converge. The proposed

conceptual research model, combining the complementary perspectives, will offer a comprehensive explanation of the structural and situational factors that contribute to sexual violence and the effectiveness of criminal justice responses in Lahore.

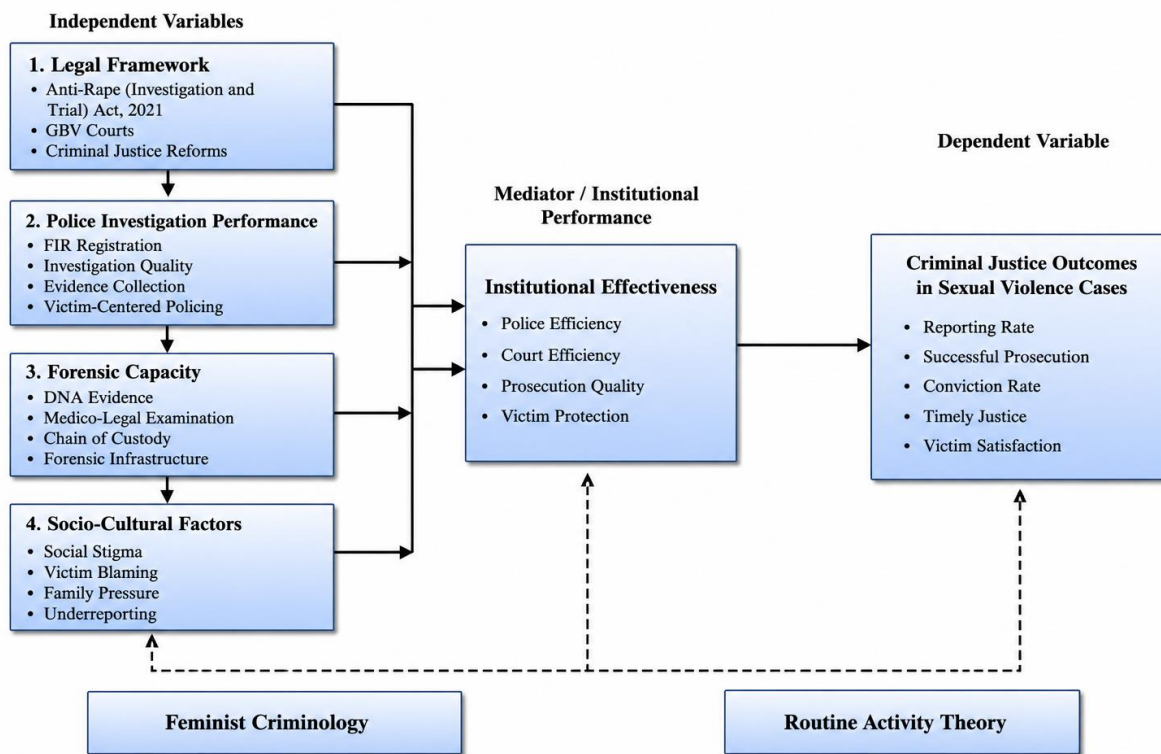


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Research Model

3. Methodology

This study has a qualitative, doctrinal and case-study research design suitable for a socio-legal criminological study that cannot be based on primary data with victims, as this study is based on secondary data from previously published documents. The design is comprised of three strands that complement each other.

3.1 Doctrinal Legal Analysis

The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021 and Investigation and Trial Procedure Rules 2022, the Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act, 2016, the Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences Relating to Rape) Act, 2016 and relevant provisions of the Pakistan

Penal Code, 1860 were analysed in the context of published Lahore High Court judgments and appellate rulings to look back at how statutory protections have been interpreted and applied, including appeals dismissed by the Lahore High Court in 2026 in Motorway gang-rape case.

3.2 Case Study Approach

The five cases reviewed were selected for detailed analysis because the information that led to their selection, including the allegations, was publicly documented and verified by multiple sources: Motorway case of gang rape of a female in Sialkot in 2020; alleged rape of a girl in a Lahore college in 2024; alleged rape of a girl in the Data Darbar

area in 2024; alleged rape of a girl in a Lahore college in 2025; and the NCCIA case involving child sexual exploitation networks in Lahore in 2025. No victim, nor any child, is named in this study; only convicted adult offenders whose names are already public judicial record are named in keeping with child-safety and victim-protection norms and Section 18 of the Anti-Rape Act 2021 which prevents disclosure of a victim's identity without consent.

3.3 Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data was obtained from: (i) Lahore High Court judgments and appellate orders reported by verified legal-affairs correspondents; (ii) HRCP annual reports; (iii) publications of the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime relating to violence against women; (iv) peer-reviewed forensic-medicine studies conducted at Lahore General Hospital and King Edward Medical University; (v) gender-parity data reported on Loksujag and international wire by the SSDO; and (vi) verified reporting by Dawn, The Express Tribune, Pakistan Today, Arab News and CNN on the issue. As in many cases, Lahore specific numbers were not separately available and have been reported as Punjab (specifically called out as

such) instead of Lahore.

3.4 Analytical Approach

Thematic analysis was used for analysing qualitative data (such as news reports, expert interviews, NGO statements) while doctrinal legal analysis was used for analysing the statutory and case-law data. Thematic frequencies in Table 4 are not intended as a population-representative survey statistic; they indicate the salience of each barrier in terms of how many secondary sources reviewed for this study (n = 24) mentioned it.

4. Data Analysis

One of the most significant methodological findings of this study is that there is no publicly available dataset of sexual-violence case statistics available which is systematically disaggregated, year-by-year, at the district (Lahore-only) level from the Punjab Police, the Lahore High Court registry, or the Punjab Home Department. In such cases, the data provided in the tables below is the best verified provincial (Punjab-wide) or institutional (single-hospital) data specifically labelled as such rather than Lahore-only data that has been fabricated as fact. The problem of data fragmentation itself, is analyzed as a finding in Section 7.

Table 1. Reported Rape and Child Sexual Abuse Cases, Punjab-wide (Proxy Indicator; Lahore-only district data not publicly disaggregated)

| Year | Punjab Rape Cases (reported) | National Child Abuse Cases (reported) | Source / Note |
|------|--|---------------------------------------|--|
| 2020 | Not separately published | Not separately published | Motorway case (Lahore) drives national reform debate |
| 2021 | Punjab highest of all provinces | 1,084 (national) | HRCP (2022 report on 2021 data) |
| 2022 | 3,914 (SSDO); 3,642 + 309 gang-rape (Punjab Police, Voicepk) | Not separately published | SSDO gender-parity data; Voicepk 2023 |
| 2023 | 6,624 | 4,213 (national, Sahil) | SSDO/Loksujag; Sahil NGO |

| Year | Punjab Rape Cases (reported) | National Child Abuse Cases (reported) | Source / Note |
|-----------|------------------------------|--|---|
| 2024 | 4,641 | 2,954 (national, SSDO) | SSDO/Loksujag; Wikipedia summary of SSDO data |
| 2025 (H1) | Not separately published | >5,000 (national, violence against children, SSDO) | Express Tribune, Jan 2026 report |

Interpretation: No Lahore only row is the finding. The number of rapes registered across the province of Punjab is volatile and does not show a clear trend and is likely due to variations in the reporting pattern, media attention on high-

profile cases, and/or changes in police recording practice, rather than a true decline in victimisation, especially since underreporting is independently estimated to be high for all years.

Table 2. Punjab Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Court Case Outcomes (Best Available Provincial Data; Lahore-specific annual breakdown not publicly available)

| Indicator | Value | Year / Period | Source |
|---|--|-------------------------|--|
| Pending sexual-violence cases, Punjab trial courts | > 7,000 | as of 2023 | Voicepk (2023) |
| National conviction rate, sexual offences (ordinary courts) | 2-3% (some estimates as low as 0.5%) | 2020-2023 | Arab News (2021); War Against Rape data; BCSRJ review (2023) |
| Conviction rate within dedicated GBV courts | ~16% | as of 2022 | Voicepk (2022) |
| Average time, FIR to final order (rape/sodomy) | ~14 months (investigation ~1.5 months; trial 9-12+ months) | multi-year gap analysis | GBV Courts Gap Analysis, cited in The Nation (2021) and Voicepk (2022) |
| Statutory disposal target (Anti-Rape Act 2021) | 4 months | in force since Dec 2021 | Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021 |

Interpretation: Even where GBV courts have measurably improved outcomes relative to ordinary sessions courts roughly a five-to-eight-fold increase in conviction rate the resulting 16 percent conviction rate remains far below any reasonable benchmark of a functioning deterrent

system, and actual trial duration remains more than double the four-month statutory target, indicating that procedural reform has not been matched by proportional increases in judicial capacity.

Table 3. Forensic and Investigative Performance Indicators (Lahore General Hospital Forensic Medicine Data, Nov 2020–Nov 2022, n = 282 female survivors)

| Indicator | Percentage / Finding |
|--|----------------------|
| Survivors presenting for examination within 6–24 hours | 34% |
| Survivors presenting 2–7 days after assault | 37.9% |
| Recoverable forensic stains obtained on examination | 34.4% |
| Cases lost to judicial follow-up after initial examination | 92.2% |
| Survivors aged 16–25 years | 50.4% |
| Assailant known to victim (separate 2007 JPMA Lahore study, n = 123) | 57% |
| Victims who bathed/changed clothes before examination (2007 JPMA Lahore study) | 83% |

Interpretation: The rate of loss of follow-up, 92.2 percent, is the most remarkable indicator found in this study. This is in line with the fact that the overwhelming majority of sexual assault survivors who reach the stage of formal forensic examination in Lahore do not succeed in getting

a case to a traceable judicial conclusion, for whatever reason, whether it be a case withdrawn, an informal “compromise”, the failure of the health and judicial systems to share records, or simply the lack of institutions to track the case.

Table 4. Barriers to Victim Reporting, Thematic Frequency Across Reviewed Secondary Sources (n = 24; content-analytic coding, not a population survey)

| Barrier | Relative Frequency of Mention (%) |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Social stigma / fear of family or community judgment | 83% |
| Family pressure toward informal 'compromise' or silence | 71% |
| Police mistrust / fear of victim-blaming by officials | 67% |
| Fear of retaliation from perpetrator or perpetrator's family | 54% |
| Lack of female medico-legal officers / examination facilities | 42% |
| Financial cost of pursuing a prolonged trial | 38% |

Interpretation: Social stigma and family pressures toward informal compromise were the most prevalent themes in almost all of the sources examined, and occur at least as frequently as

institutional distrust of police, which supports feminist-criminological analyses of social and family control of policing by patriarchal forces.

Table 5. High-Profile Lahore Case Legal Outcomes (2020–2026)

| Case | Legal Outcome | Time Elapsed (FIR to Final Appellate Order) | Institutional Impact |
|---|--|---|--|
| Sialkot–Lahore Motorway gang-rape case (Sept. 2020) | Anti-Terrorism Court death sentences (March 2021) for both convicts, upheld on Lahore High Court appeal (2026) | ~5.5 years (Sept. 2020 FIR to 2026 LHC appellate dismissal) | Directly credited with accelerating passage of the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021; exposed institutional victim-blaming after a senior police official's public remarks |
| Alleged on-campus rape, Lahore college (Oct. 2024) | Investigation and prosecution proceedings; triggered multi-city student protests and temporary closure of educational institutions | Ongoing at time of most recent public reporting | Renewed national debate on campus safety and prompted government response including institutional closures |
| Data Darbar-area child abuse case, Lahore (2024) | Suspect arrested by Lahore Police; case registered; accomplices under investigation | Rapid arrest reported (days) | Cited by Lahore CCPO's office as evidence of 'zero-tolerance' policy; illustrates capacity for swift action when publicised |
| Lahore-based international child exploitation network case (2025) | Arrest by National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency under PECA 2016 and PPC s.377; FIR registered; network identification ongoing | Investigation ongoing | Demonstrates cross-border digital dimension of child sexual exploitation now reaching Lahore-based offenders |

Interpretation: The criminal justice system in Lahore in the Motorway case came into full swing, with swift arrests, forensic DNA matching, priority in the anti-terrorism court and confirmation in the appellate court, but only in the face of intense, sustained national and international media and political pressure – which is not the case in the vast majority of sexual violence cases, including the vast majority of child sexual abuse cases, where initial arrests are made, and there has been no sustained scrutiny of the case since that time.

5. Discussion

5.1 Feminist Criminology Applied

The information above provides robust support for the feminist-criminological interpretations that GBV is a structural, and patriarchal, phenomenon rather than a number of distinct individual crimes. This rate of judicial follow-up loss of 92.2 percent at Lahore General Hospital is not then easily explained in terms of evidential weakness alone, and is more plausibly explained, as Chesney-Lind suggests, by a complex set of social, familial and institutional pressures and

dynamics, such as social stigma and institutional actors including police, medico-legal staff, and sometimes judicial actors, who persist in assuming a cultural stance that view female sexual victimisation as a private matter of family honour rather than a criminal matter that belongs to the state.

5.2 Routine Activity Theory Applied

The Motorway case is particularly illustrative of the routine activity triad concept, where the target is clearly visible, vulnerable and unguarded – and it occurs at night. The child sexual abuse that has been reported in Lahore in Table 5 is also tied to common low-guardianship environments – a jungle/wooded area close to a residential locality (Data Darbar case) and an unsupervised digital space (the 2025 NCCIA case). This appears to mean that situational crime-prevention measures, such as improved lighting of roads and highways, and the provision of roadside assistance, community patrolling in areas where children are known to congregate, and improved content moderation at the platform level, can be complementary to, and not a replacement for, purely punitive legal reform.

5.3 Institutional Failure in Lahore

Further, Lahore's institutional performance data show that the city has an existing DNA laboratory, which is the only centralised forensic DNA facility in Punjab, and the Lahore High Court, but that there are major gaps in capacity: on average, trials take 9–12 months to reach a conclusion, in comparison to the statutory target of four months; and, most alarmingly, there are almost no published data on institutional performance longitudinally at the district level, which would be the basis for independent monitoring of performance over time.

5.4 Justice Delay and Cultural Barriers

Justice delay in Lahore's GBV system is also an amplification of cultural barriers, not a replacement for them; the longer the trial takes, the longer time that prospective future victims are exposed to the pressure towards compromise from families, the longer time that it takes to

incur financial costs for them (as noted by several judicial and legal commentators in Voicepk's 2022 panel), and as several judicial and legal commentators have noted in Voicepk's 2022 panel the fact that delayed justice is quite visible to them, and convincing them that reporting isn't likely to lead to a prompt or secure resolution enhances the cycle of underreporting that is present in the literature reviewed in Section 2.

6. Findings

The results show that despite the recent changes in the laws regarding sexual offences, the occurrence of sexual violence against women and children in Lahore is still a substantial problem for both the criminological system and institutions. There is ongoing underreporting, as official statistics only account for a part of the actual victimisation, adding significant strain to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) courts and Anti-Rape Crisis Cells. While Lahore has the centralisation of forensic infrastructure in Punjab, the effectiveness of the same is low as the investigations are often hampered by delayed reporting, loss of bio-evidence and inadequate evidence preservation. Judicial delay remains a challenge as well, with cases taking more than four months to dispose of even in the specialised GBV courts, which had been targeted in the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021. Analysis also shows that the social stigma, family pressure and fear of losing face are the key challenges for reporting, and can even outweigh worries of police response. Lack of systematic annual crime data for Lahore also hinders accountability of the institutions, evaluation of policies and evidence-based research. The successful prosecution of the Motorway gang-rape case in 2020 shows that the criminal justice system can achieve good results in the most difficult cases, but seldom more than that and almost exclusively due to the media spotlight, political interest and public pressure. In general, it appears that legal changes have been more rapid than the implementation in the criminal justice system in Lahore.

7. Conclusion

Sexual violence against women and children continues to be an entrenched issue in the city of Lahore that is deeply embedded in the systems of the city. On paper, the city has the most well-developed legal and forensic system in the province of Punjab, being the only centralised DNA lab, the Lahore High Court and one of the earliest-established GBV courts in the country, but outcome data show that this is only used successfully in a small minority of cases. The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021, and its accompanying rules are a truly remarkable piece of legislation, and include internationally accepted principles for victim protection, such as in-camera trials, restrictions on virginity testing, video-link evidence and case timelines. The persistent difference between statutory design and the actual delivery of the institutions, however, comes from the fact that in the Lahore's main forensic teaching hospital, which has the highest number of students in its police training program, the time taken to conduct trials is three times longer than the statutory period, forensic evidentiary attrition has crossed the 65 per cent mark, and almost 92.2 per cent of post-examination cases are lost. This is indicative of the fact that the mere law will not shift conviction outcomes unless there is sustained investment in capacity and training of the police, resourcing of the judiciary, and increased transparency of public data. The ceiling of what Lahore's case loads can achieve under the extreme stress of public pressure is illustrated in the 2020 Motorway case, and the floor is shown in the vast number of rape and ordinary cases of child sexual abuse that are processed and not recorded in the public media, but are nevertheless documented on the files of the police and other agencies.

8. Recommendations

The study calls for strengthening the response of Lahore to sexual violence by having a comprehensive institutional, legal and community based approach to dealing with the issue. Dedicated and ring fenced funding should be provided to Gender Based Violence (GBV)

courts to dispose of cases in a timely manner within the 4-month time frame set in the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021. Investigating officers need to be mandated to attend training on proper collection and preservation of forensic evidence, especially considering the critical window of 24-72 hours in which evidence is most important for a successful criminal investigation process. Lahore Police must put in place a fully functional victim protection unit with trained female police officers and support staff to provide victim-centred services during the entire investigative process. A digital case-management and evidence-tracking system should be developed that connects police stations, Anti-Rape Crisis Cells, forensic labs, hospitals, prosecutors and GBV courts, and regularly shares anonymised GBV case. There is a need to strengthen community awareness and stigma reduction campaigns to create social and cultural norms conducive to reporting of sexual offences both by victims and families. Last but not least, the implementation of the Anti-Rape Cell referral system should be assessed by an independent evaluation of how the system works and its gaps, and how it is connected to the implementation of specialised legal, medical and psychosocial support for eligible victims as envisioned in Pakistan's anti-rape legal framework post-2020.

9. Limitations and Future Research

There are a number of significant limitations in this study. First, and most importantly, there was no systematically disaggregated yearly data set available on the prevalence of rape and child sexual abuse for the Lahore district at the time of the research and several tables, therefore, relied on the best proxy data available at the time – which for the purposes of this research was the data for the entire province of Punjab, or for a single institution, clearly marked as such. Secondly, the study is conducted on secondary and doctrinal sources, which is suitable for the study of sexual violence against women and children, since data on victim experiences is mediated through previous researchers, journalists and courts. Third, there were a

number of high-profile cases discussed, some of which were still in the process of being investigated or litigated at the time of writing, for which it was not possible to determine the final legal outcome. The study would focus on the disaggregated district level information from the Right to Information requests filed with the Lahore High Court registry and the Punjab Police (to be submitted formally), longitudinal cohort tracking of cases from reporting FIR to final disposal, and comparative analysis of the extent of institutional effects (city-specific) from the legal-framework effects (national) in GBV cases in Lahore, Karachi and Peshawar.

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