

QANDEEL WAS NOT THE LAST: REVISITING HONOR KILLING IN
PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

In Pakistan, saying “no” can be a death sentence – and so can saying “yes.” Whether a woman dares to reject a suitor or chooses her own partner, she risks being silenced forever in the name of honour. This paper revisits the chilling reality of honour killings, taking Qandeel Baloch’s high-profile murder as a starting point – not a conclusion. It examines how deeply patriarchal norms, cultural rigidity, and religious misinterpretations continue to sanction the killing of women for exercising basic rights. With the help of recent, viral, and lesser-known cases across different provinces, this study reveals a disturbing pattern: honour crimes are not just tolerated but often go unpunished. Through a combination of cultural analysis, legal loophole exploration, and media reflection, the paper questions how long this impunity will persist – and what it will take for honour to stop costing lives. Qandeel was not the first, and tragically, she was not the last.

Keywords: Honour Killing, Gender-Based Violence, Women’s Rights in South Asia, Legal Impunity, Panchayat System,

Introduction

In Pakistan, a woman who refuses a suitor is killed, and a woman who marries by choice is also killed. Between these two extremes lies the deadly cost of female autonomy in a patriarchal society that labels control as honour. Honour killing in South Asia, especially in Pakistan, continues to persist – not because there are no laws, but because the laws are routinely bypassed, forgiven, or ignored.

In 2016, the world watched in shock as Qandeel Baloch, a bold and outspoken social media personality, was strangled by her own brother in the name of honour. Her murder sparked a national outcry and prompted the Pakistani parliament to pass the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2016, which aimed to close legal loopholes that allowed killers to walk free. Yet almost a decade later, the killings continue – unabated, unpunished.

On 2nd June 2025, Sana Yousuf, a minor girl from Chitral, was shot dead by a man whose proposal she had rejected – reinforcing the tragic reality that in some places, “no” is still a fatal word. Just a month earlier, in May 2025, a young couple – Bano Bibi and Ihsan Ullah – were brutally executed by the woman’s brother after eloping. The video of their killing went viral in July, sparking widespread condemnation on social media but little legal movement.

These cases, far from isolated, are part of a systemic pattern. In 2021 alone, over 470 cases of honour killings were officially reported in Pakistan – while human rights defenders estimate the actual number exceeds 1,000 women

killed each year, many of them in rural areas where silence and fear mask the truth.

Despite legal instruments like Section 311 of the Pakistan Penal Code and the 2016 amendment designed to block forgiveness under Qisas and Diyat laws, customary justice systems such as the Jirga and Panchayat often override formal law. These parallel structures enable perpetrators to walk free – especially when families, communities, and even courts tacitly endorse these acts.

This paper revisits the phenomenon of honor killings in Pakistan through the lens of these three emblematic cases. It explores how law, culture, and societal silence intersect to create an environment of tolerated violence. By asking why Qandeel was not the last one, this research examines the ongoing failure of the state and society to protect women – and how the notion of honour continues to be used as a weapon to erase choice, agency, and life.

Literature Review

In Pakistan, honor murders have a substantial impact on women's rights, including as equality before the law, freedom of choice, and life. These behaviors have their origins in cultural standards that link female behavior, especially in relation to marriage and sexuality, with family honor. Because to societal acceptability and ineffective legal enforcement, the state frequently fails to act effectively. Victims are frequently members of communities where women's access to justice is impeded by parallel judicial systems that take precedence over formal courts. Women

are left defenseless and frequently silenced through threats or coerced reconciliation because of the absence of accountability, which also encourages offenders and deters reporting of such crimes (Amnesty International, 2016).

Perspective and Community the Rea Women's rights are seriously violated by honor killings because they restrict their ability to select their own route in marriage, romantic relationships, and movement. In addition to causing bodily harm, these behaviors limit the social and mental autonomy of women. Such behaviors are normalized, which creates a poisonous atmosphere and deprives women of their agency from an early age. Silence from the community and legal indifference support the idea that violence connected to honor is permissible. Because of law enforcement's corruption and prejudice, legal systems are rarely believed, and honor murders are used as an oppressive tactic to uphold patriarchal dominance (Shahid, Awan & Rana, 2024).

Informal conflict settlement processes run by male elders, which emphasize family reconciliation ahead of justice, frequently lead to honor murders, depriving victims of justice. Women's voices are frequently silenced, and their deaths are presented as sacrifices for maintaining social harmony. Women lose their rights as a result, and legal institutions lose their power. Victims are held accountable for breaking societal rules, while offenders are seen as honor guardians. The formal legal system is becoming distrusted as a result of acquittals brought on by shoddy investigations and unfair prosecution (Iqbal, 2007).

Due to the cohabitation of tribal and state legal systems, honor murders frequently fail. Customary courts are frequently used in rural areas, where they value male control and see women's independence as a danger. Restoring order by violence is acceptable in order to safeguard vulnerable groups and erode state power. Women who survive attempts are subjected to lack of assistance, social marginalization, and threats. An overall breakdown in governance and human rights enforcement is highlighted by psychological damage and the impunity of criminals, which perpetuate cycles of abuse and silence (Warraich, 2005).

Lari (2) explains the cultural perspective in her research in the form of notions. The first notion defines the prestige of the family within the society. This familial honor embedded with the modest and purity of the women of the family(2). Chesler & Bloom(10) defines this familial respect as "Ghairat" in Urdu and Pashto Language of Pakistan. The second notion is the ownership of women by men as property(2). According to the first tool of gender analysis framework, as explained by Hajjar(6) in her article that woman is a reproductive commodity, involved in

reproductive and caretaker of the family while the men are a productive commodity. This concept migrated from a patriarchal culture of Hindu who preaches about the subordinated concept of women in society as mentioned by Niaz(5)

1. Analysis

Honour killing in Pakistan is not a sporadic crime, but a recurrent and deeply rooted cultural phenomenon. Historically associated with tribal traditions and rural customs, these killings are often framed as acts necessary to preserve family or community "honour" when a woman is perceived to have violated social norms, particularly around marriage, sexuality, or obedience.

1.1 The Landmark Case of Qandeel Baloch

In July 2016, the murder of Qandeel Baloch – a 26-year-old social media personality – shook the conscience of Pakistan. Known for her outspoken online presence and bold expression of herself, she was disliked by her family members. Eventually, she was strangled to death by her brother. His brother was arrested but later released because he was forgiven by Qandeel's parents. Consequently, the parliament passed the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2016, intended to prevent family members from "forgiving" the perpetrator – a loophole previously used to free many honour killers.

Despite these legal reforms, Qandeel's killer was later released after her parents "pardoned" him under Islamic law, exposing the weaknesses and contradictions in implementation. Her murder became a turning point in the country's discourse on gender-based violence but not necessarily in its legal enforcement.

1.2 The Case of Sana Yousuf

Nearly a decade after Qandeel's murder, the pattern of violence remained unbroken. On 2nd June 2025, Sana Yousuf – a social media influencer from Chitral – was shot dead by a local man whose marriage proposal she had rejected. Her act of refusal was perceived as dishonourable enough to warrant death. The case gained attention online, but no substantial legal progress has been reported as of yet.

1.3 The Honour Killing of Bano Bibi and Ihsan Ullah

In May 2025, a young couple – Bano Bibi and Ihsan Ullah – were brutally killed by the woman's family members after eloping. Their killing was captured on video and circulated on social media in July 2025, leading to widespread condemnation. The visuals showed the brutality of such crimes and the public spectacle they have become. However, much like previous cases, legal follow-up has remained weak, with local power structures potentially obstructing formal justice procedures.

1.4 Quantitative Data: The Tip of the Iceberg

According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), nearly 470 honour killings were officially reported in 2024 alone – a number that does not account for the hundreds of unreported or misclassified cases. These numbers underline that the problem is neither isolated nor diminishing. Many cases remain buried under the silence of family pressure, tribal customs, or local panchayats that settle such “disputes” informally.

2. Cultural Constructs and Patriarchal Control

Honour killings in Pakistan are not merely acts of violence – they are cultural performances rooted in centuries-old patriarchal ideologies. These ideologies glorify male dominance and female submissiveness, creating a system where control over women’s choices becomes a marker of honour for men and families.

2.1 Honour as a Gendered Concept

In Pakistani society, honour (izzat) is closely tied to women’s sexuality and obedience. While men’s actions rarely threaten family honour, women’s personal choices – choosing a partner, dressing differently, speaking out – are policed. These acts are seen not as individual rights but as communal threats. The burden of honour is disproportionately placed on women, making them perpetual subjects of scrutiny.

According to sociologist Rubina Saigol, honour is “a code that regulates women’s behavior to reinforce male privilege and control.” This cultural norm is further enforced through stories, proverbs, and rituals that normalize violence as a tool to “correct” disobedient women.

2.2 The Role of Customary Institutions: Jirga and Panchayat

Parallel justice systems like Jirgas and Panchayats – especially in rural Sindh, Balochistan, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – often override formal law. These male-dominated councils frequently order honour killings or vani (the giving of girls to settle disputes), all under the pretense of restoring familial or tribal honour. In many cases, law enforcement turns a blind eye, allowing these illegal courts to function with impunity.

For example, in 2019, a jirga in Kohistan ordered the killing of five girls who were seen in a mobile video clapping during a wedding. Despite a court ruling years later, local resistance and fear made justice almost impossible.

2.3 Silence and Social Endorsement

What allows these killings to persist is not just lawlessness, but societal silence. Family members, neighbors, and community elders often condone or conceal such crimes. In some cases, mothers have participated in their daughters’ murders under family pressure. This normalization makes honour killings not just acts of violence but rituals of collective control – where both women

and men are conditioned into accepting murder as justice.

This pervasive silence further discourages reporting, blocks justice, and reinforces the perception that a woman’s autonomy is expendable.

3. Legal Framework and Its Loopholes

Despite the horrifying frequency of honour killings in Pakistan, the country has implemented several legal reforms – most notably the Criminal Law (Amendment) [Offences in the name or pretext of Honour] Act, 2016 – in the aftermath of Qandeel Baloch’s murder. However, these legal tools have often proven ineffective due to implementation gaps, societal resistance, and structural loopholes.

3.1 The 2016 Amendment – A hopeful Shift?

The 2016 amendment to the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) aimed to close the forgiveness loophole under Section 311, which previously allowed family members to pardon the killer – often the perpetrator himself or a close relative. The revised law made murder in the name of honour a non-compoundable offence, meaning the perpetrator could still face life imprisonment even if pardoned. While this was a progressive step, the wording of the amendment left room for interpretation. For example, although the minimum punishment is life imprisonment, the courts can still consider the “facts and circumstances” to award a lesser punishment. In 2022, Muhammad Waseem, Qandeel Baloch’s brother, was acquitted despite having confessed to the crime. The court’s ruling hinged on a technicality – the forgiveness loophole was arguably exploited before the amendment could be retroactively applied.

3.2 Judicial Inconsistencies and Legal Loopholes

Many honour killing cases are either dismissed due to lack of evidence, withdrawn after out-of-court settlements, or delayed indefinitely. Judicial inconsistency allows judges to exercise discretion even in the most heinous cases. For example in 2014 case of Farzana Parveen, who was stoned to death outside Lahore High Court for marrying by choice, saw several of the accused acquitted later due to “insufficient evidence” – even though the murder happened in public view.

3.3 Lack of Witness Protection and Investigative Will

Law enforcement often fails to properly investigate honour crimes due to local pressure, bribes, or community alliances. Witnesses are rarely protected, and in many cases, police discourage families from filing FIRs. According to a report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), over 470 honour killings were reported in 2023 alone, with many more likely unreported due to fear, shame, and collusion.

4. Media, Society, and the Role of Digital Exposure

In recent years, the media – both mainstream and digital – has emerged as a double-edged sword in the battle against honour killings. On one hand, it amplifies the voices of victims and survivors; on the other, it often trivializes their stories or fuels the very mindset that promotes honour-based violence.

4.1 Social Media as a Mirror and Amplifier

The murder of Qandeel Baloch in 2016 revealed how social media platforms can simultaneously empower and endanger women. Her online persona challenged traditional gender norms, earning her admiration and intense backlash in equal measure. Qandeel's fame became the justification for her murder, yet the digital outrage that followed also forced legislative change.

Quote from the Guardian (2016):

“She was a contradiction Pakistan wasn’t ready to accept – and her death forced the nation to reckon with that discomfort.”

In 2025, the viral video showing the execution of Bano Bibi and Ihsan Ullah sent shockwaves through social media, reviving national debates and calls for justice. Platforms like X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and Instagram flooded with hashtags like #JusticeForBano and #EndHonourKillings, putting pressure on law enforcement and politicians.

Yet, despite public outcry, such cases often receive no meaningful legal closure, proving that digital exposure alone cannot substitute for institutional accountability.

4.2 Media Sensationalism vs. Ethical Reporting

While digital media can spread awareness, mainstream media in Pakistan often walks the line between responsible reporting and sensationalism. Many outlets highlight honour killing stories with exaggerated headlines or selectively focus on “shameful” female behavior rather than condemning the violence.

This selective narrative reinforces the myth that honour killings are somehow culturally justifiable, particularly when rural or tribal norms are involved. Ethical journalism, which centers the victim's autonomy and condemns the perpetrators without moral ambiguity, remains rare.

Example: Coverage of Sana Yousuf's killing on June 2, 2025, ranged from victim-blaming language to silence in some conservative regional outlets. However, alternative platforms like Naya Daur, VoicePK, and international outlets like BBC Urdu provided more nuanced, victim-centered narratives.

5. The Role of Customary Systems – Jirgas and Panchayats

In many regions of Pakistan, particularly in tribal and rural areas, informal justice systems like Jirgas and Panchayats continue to operate

alongside formal state institutions. These parallel legal structures often resolve disputes based on tribal codes, customs, and patriarchal traditions – frequently at odds with the Constitution and human rights frameworks.

5.1 Jirgas: Justice or Patriarchal Reinforcement?

Jirgas are tribal councils consisting mostly of elder men who settle disputes through collective decision-making. While seen by some as accessible and swift forums for justice, they have been repeatedly criticized for violating women's rights.

In cases of honour killings, Jirgas have historically facilitated “forgiveness” under the pretext of reconciliation. The family of the victim – often the same as the perpetrator – forgives the murderer, allowing them to walk free. This was evident in the Qandeel Baloch case, where her brother was legally forgiven by his parents under the Diyat clause – a loophole that the 2016 Criminal Law (Amendment) Act sought to close but failed to eliminate entirely in practice.

Human Rights Watch (2019) noted that “in many cases, Jirga decisions result in honour killings being settled with compensation or forgiveness, perpetuating cycles of violence.”

5.2 Panchayats and Gender-Based Violence

Similar to Jirgas, Panchayats operate in parts of Punjab and Sindh. In many instances, they have not only justified honour killings but also ordered them. In 2002, the globally condemned case of Mukhtaran Mai, who was gang-raped on orders of a Panchayat as retribution for her brother's alleged affair, spotlighted how these systems enable violence under the guise of “honour.”

Although Panchayats do not have legal standing under Pakistani law, enforcement is weak, and local police often defer to these bodies due to cultural pressure or political influence. In Bano Bibi and Ihsan Ullah's case (2025), initial reports suggested that a local Jirga had already declared their elopement a breach of family honour – implicitly condoning the murder that followed.

5.3 Lack of Accountability and State Complicity

The tolerance of these traditional systems reflects a deeper state failure to uphold constitutional protections. Even when cases reach formal courts, many judges show leniency toward perpetrators of honour-based violence, especially when community elders or religious leaders express support for the accused.

6. The Law: Gaps between Legislation and Implementation

Pakistan has made several legislative attempts to curb honour killings, particularly in response to high-profile cases that captured public and international attention. However, while the laws exist on paper, their implementation remains weak, riddled with loopholes, and often

overridden by cultural norms and informal justice mechanisms.

6.1 Legal Milestones: From PPC 302 to the 2016 Amendment

The Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), under Section 302, criminalizes murder, including honour killings. However, prior to 2016, many such killings went unpunished due to the Qisas and Diyat law, which allowed the victim's family to "forgive" the killer – often the same family that condoned the murder.

The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2016 was enacted after the murder of Qandeel Baloch. It closed some legal loopholes by making honour killings punishable by life imprisonment, even if the family forgave the killer.

(Pakistan Penal Code, Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences in the Name or Pretext of Honour) Act, 2016.)

[Government of Pakistan Official Gazette, 2016]

6.2 Enforcement Challenges

Despite the legal amendments, enforcement has been minimal. Many police officials still label such killings as "domestic matters" or "family disputes." Investigations are either delayed or botched, and prosecutions are weak. Like in the case of Sana Yousuf, despite public outrage and media attention, no major legal breakthroughs occurred for weeks after her killing. Activists noted that local law enforcement initially attempted to downplay the case as a "lover's quarrel." In rural regions, the influence of tribal elders and political figures prevents proper arrests. Legal processes are further weakened when families refuse to testify, either out of shame, fear, or social pressure.

6.3 Cultural Bias in Courtrooms

Even when cases do reach courts, judicial bias and patriarchal attitudes often result in lighter sentences or outright acquittals. Defence lawyers often argue that the accused acted "in a fit of rage" or "to defend honour," invoking sympathy. For reference, in 2019 case reported by Dawn News, a Lahore-based man who confessed to killing his sister for choosing her own partner received only a five-year sentence due to the court accepting his remorse as a mitigating factor.

7. The Culture of Silence and Social Endorsement of Honour Crimes

While laws against honour killings exist, their effectiveness is drastically undercut by the deeply entrenched cultural norms that condone, justify, or outright support these crimes. Honour killings are not just legal failures – they are societal failures, reinforced by silence, fear, and communal complicity.

7.1 Family Honor as Social Currency

In many parts of Pakistan, especially in tribal and rural areas, a family's reputation is considered more important than an individual's life. A

woman's decisions – whether related to clothing, education, marriage, or divorce – are seen as reflections of family honour. Any deviation from accepted norms is met with harsh backlash, often culminating in death. For instance, in 2020, a 16-year-old girl in Dadu, Sindh, was killed by her uncle for talking to a male classmate. The family described her behavior as "shameful" and refused to register the case, insisting it was a matter of honour.

7.2 The Complicity of Communities

Beyond families, communities often reinforce silence through social pressure, shaming, or the threat of further violence. Jirgas and Panchayats – traditional tribal councils – often settle such matters by endorsing or pardoning the killers. In some cases, they even order the killings themselves to "cleanse" the family's name. For example, in Kohistan (2012), a jirga reportedly ordered the killing of five girls after a video of them singing with boys surfaced online. The video went viral, but despite Supreme Court intervention, justice was never fully served.

7.3 Media and the Role of Silence

Although the media often highlights honour killings, it also reinforces cultural biases through victim-blaming narratives. News reports frequently include phrases like "she was in a relationship," "she married without consent," or "she brought shame," subtly justifying the violence. Furthermore, unreported cases – especially in remote regions – are believed to be significantly higher than official figures.

According to the Aurat Foundation, while around 470 honour killings were reported in 2024 alone, the real number could be much higher due to lack of reporting, forced burials without autopsies, and community silence.

8. Legal Responses: What the Law Says and Where It Fails

In the aftermath of Qandeel Baloch's murder in 2016, Pakistan passed the Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences in the Name or Pretext of Honour) Act, 2016, which was widely regarded as a major step toward justice for victims of honour killings. The law aimed to close the loophole that allowed perpetrators to escape punishment if they were "forgiven" by the victim's family, a clause that had been misused in many honour killing cases because perpetrators and victims often belonged to the same family. Under the 2016 amendment, courts were empowered to sentence the murderer to life imprisonment even if the family pardoned him. The amendment also explicitly recognized honour killing as a distinct and punishable crime. However, the existence of stronger legislation has not necessarily resulted in stronger protection for women. Legal reform can only be effective when it is consistently implemented by the police, courts, and other institutions responsible for enforcing the law. Therefore, while the 2016

amendment represented an important legal development, its effectiveness must be assessed through its practical application rather than its symbolic value.

However, legal progress has remained limited at the level of implementation. The inclusion of Section 311 of the Pakistan Penal Code, which allows judges to override pardons and enforce a minimum sentence, still gives them considerable discretionary power. In practice, this discretion is not always exercised effectively, particularly in rural areas where customary systems such as the Jirga and Panchayat continue to influence decisions and where patriarchal values remain deeply rooted. Despite the presence of Qisas and Diyat laws, which allow forgiveness and compensation in certain criminal cases, these provisions can be exploited in honour killing cases. Families may collude with perpetrators or may be pressured into forgiving them, allowing offenders to avoid meaningful punishment. The case of Qandeel Baloch illustrates this problem. Her brother, Waseem, was sentenced to life imprisonment but was later released after their parents reportedly “forgave” him, raising serious questions about the practical strength and enforcement of the 2016 amendments (Dawn, 2022). This demonstrates that legal provisions alone cannot eliminate honour killings when the social and familial structures surrounding these crimes continue to support or protect perpetrators.

Moreover, the state's failure to provide effective witness protection, the slow pace of court proceedings, and inadequate police responses contribute to an environment of impunity. In many cases, victims and their families are left without adequate institutional support, while perpetrators benefit from social pressure, family influence, or weaknesses within the criminal justice system. Recent cases, such as the murders of Bano Bibi and Ihsan Ullah and Sana Yousuf, have further raised concerns about the ability of state institutions to respond effectively to honour related violence. Even when evidence becomes widely available and public outrage increases, the existence of evidence alone does not guarantee timely investigation or prosecution. This gap between public attention and institutional action reflects a broader weakness in the state's response to honour killings. The problem, therefore, is not simply the absence of laws but the failure to ensure that these laws are applied consistently and that victims and witnesses are adequately protected throughout the justice process.

International human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have consistently criticized Pakistan for the weak enforcement of existing laws and the lack of meaningful institutional reform. Their criticism highlights an important reality: honour killings do not continue because Pakistan lacks a legal framework, but because legal provisions often operate within a social environment shaped by patriarchal values,

cultural pressure, legal loopholes, and unequal power structures. In this context, Pakistan's legal journey against honour killing remains fragmented and fragile. The symbolic passage of laws is not enough to address a problem that is deeply connected to social attitudes and institutional weaknesses. Without consistent enforcement of the law, stronger state responsibility, effective protection for victims and witnesses, and the dismantling of parallel justice mechanisms such as Jirgas that facilitate extrajudicial decisions, the problem of honour killing will remain difficult to overcome. Ultimately, the effectiveness of Pakistan's legal response should be measured not by the number of laws passed but by whether those laws can protect women, hold perpetrators accountable, and ensure that no individual can use the concept of honour as a justification for murder.

9. Conclusion

Honour killing in Pakistan is not a relic of the past. It is a living tragedy that continues to claim lives with horrifying regularity. Despite the enactment of legal reforms such as the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2016, which aimed to close forgiveness loopholes, the killings persist. This reveals the deep entrenchment of patriarchal norms that override both human rights and the law. As this paper has demonstrated through recent and widely reported cases, the act of a woman saying “no” or choosing her own partner is still treated as a provocation worthy of death.

This is not merely a legal failure. It is also a cultural and societal one. From the jirga system that sanctions extrajudicial decisions to the communities that celebrate or remain silent in the face of “honourable” violence, the social environment surrounding honour killing often protects the killer more than the victim. What remains clear is that these murders are not about honour. They are about power, control, and the fear of female agency.

Qandeel Baloch, Sana Yousuf, Bano Bibi, and countless unnamed others were not only victims of individual men but also of a system that taught those men to kill and made it possible for them to escape justice. Their stories are not isolated incidents. They are symptoms of a wider social and cultural problem. Until Pakistan confronts this uncomfortable truth, until the law is enforced without compromise, and until society refuses to accept honour as a justification for murder, women will continue to pay with their lives simply for making their own choices.

Let this not be another case study added to the archive of apathy. Let this be the moment when we stop asking, “How many more?” and start responding with action, accountability, and reform.

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