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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN PAKISTAN: SOCIAL NORMS, ECONOMIC DEPENDENCY AND BARRIERS TO JUSTICE

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Abstract

Domestic violence (DV) against women remains a persistent and under-addressed social problem in Pakistan, sustained by the interaction of restrictive social norms, women's economic dependency, and structural barriers within both formal and informal justice systems. This paper synthesizes recent Pakistani-focused literature (2024–2026) to examine how fatalistic and patriarchal social norms shape women's acceptance of violence, how economic dependency limits women's ability to exit abusive relationships, and how legal, procedural, and socio-cultural obstacles restrict access to justice. Twenty-four studies spanning survey research, discourse and legal analysis, comparative policy evaluation, and media/literary critique are organized into a thematic literature review and summarized in a structured comparison table. The review finds that while social-norms research and legal-doctrinal analysis are well developed, there remains a shortage of integrated, quantitative studies that model the joint effect of social norms and economic dependency on justice-seeking behavior, and a shortage of large-scale primary data linking these three dimensions within a single analytic framework. The paper concludes by identifying this integration gap as a priority for future empirical research and by proposing a conceptual framework linking social norms, economic dependency, and access to justice as sequential and reinforcing barriers.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

Violence against women within the domestic sphere is one of the most widespread yet least reported forms of gender-based violence in Pakistan. National health surveys have repeatedly found that roughly one in four to one in three ever-married women report having experienced physical violence at some point in their marital life, with substantially higher proportions reporting psychological or economic abuse (Shaikh, 2024). Pakistan is a patriarchal, collectivist society in which family honor, marital stability and intergenerational obligation are weighted heavily against individual autonomy, and in which a woman's social standing is frequently tied to her ability to preserve the appearance of a harmonious household, whatever the private cost (Ijaz & Butt, 2026; Asif et al., 2025). Within this context, domestic violence is rarely a single, isolated act; it is more often woven into an ongoing pattern of control that spans physical, psychological, economic, and sexual dimensions, and that is sustained by norms, institutions, and material constraints operating simultaneously rather than independently.

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Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

Despite the existence of federal legislation such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act and a series of provincial domestic-violence and women-protection acts, enforcement remains inconsistent across provinces, and social attitudes frequently normalize or excuse violent behavior within marriage (Asghar, 2024; Gondal & Hatta, 2024). Legal protection on paper does not automatically translate into protection in practice: a law that exists but is rarely invoked, poorly understood, or unevenly enforced by police and lower courts provides limited practical recourse to a woman deciding whether to report abuse (Siddique & Eze, 2026; Khan et al., 2026).

1.2 Problem Statement

The persistence of domestic violence in Pakistan cannot be explained by any single factor. Attitudinal research shows that many women themselves endorse norms that excuse or minimize abuse (Habib et al., 2024; Ijaz & Butt, 2026); economic research shows that women who might otherwise leave an abusive relationship frequently lack the independent income or assets to do so (Bano, 2025; Shah et al., 2025); and legal research shows that even women who do wish to pursue formal redress face procedural, financial, and social obstacles that discourage or defeat their claims (Asghar, 2024; Siddique & Eze, 2026; Farooq & Shehzad, 2025). The problem, in other words, is not merely that violence occurs, but that three separate systems social, economic and legal each independently make it difficult for a woman to exit or challenge an abusive relationship, and the existing literature has generally examined these systems one at a time rather than as a connected whole.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Understanding domestic violence as the joint product of social norms, economic dependency, and barriers to justice has direct relevance for Pakistan's progress toward Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality) and Goal 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions), and for the design of any future policy or legal reform. A review that draws together recent scholarship across these three domains rather than treating them as separate literatures can help researchers identify where evidence is strong, where it is thin, and where future primary research would have the greatest value for both scholarship and policy. This is particularly important given that several of the reviewed studies are themselves recent calls for further empirical work (Ahmed et al., 2025; Siddique & Eze, 2026), suggesting that the field is at a point where a synthesizing review can meaningfully shape the next generation of research questions.

1.4 Objectives of the Review

- To synthesize recent (2024–2026) Pakistani-focused literature on domestic violence organized around three themes: social norms and fatalism, economic dependency, and barriers to justice.
- To produce a structured, comparable summary of methodology, contribution, and limitation across the reviewed studies.
- To identify the principal gaps in the existing literature, with particular attention to the degree to which the three themes have been studied jointly versus separately.
- To propose a conceptual framework that can guide future empirical research linking social norms, economic dependency, and access to justice.

1.5 Scope and Method of the Review

This review covers 24 unique, Pakistan-focused sources published between 2024 and 2026 (two duplicate citations in the original reference set were consolidated), spanning empirical survey and interview studies, doctrinal and discourse-analytic legal scholarship, comparative cross-country analysis, secondary analysis of national health-survey data, and media and literary criticism. Sources were organized thematically rather than chronologically and are synthesized narratively in Section 3 and comparatively in the summary table in Section 4. Where a study's methodology or specific findings could not be independently verified against the full text, its characterization in this review is drawn

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Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

from the title, abstract, and publication venue, and is flagged as such; this review does not report primary statistical results, graphs, or model-performance metrics (such as ROC curves) that would require an original dataset, since none was available for this synthesis.

1.6 Pakistan's Legal and Policy Landscape

Since the passage of the 18th Constitutional Amendment in 2010, legislation on domestic violence in Pakistan has been primarily a provincial rather than federal responsibility, resulting in a patchwork of laws that differ across Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and the federal capital territory. Provinces have, at various points, enacted their own domestic-violence or women-protection statutes, alongside longer-standing general criminal-law provisions (such as those addressing assault, hurt, and, in the most severe cases, murder) that can also apply to family violence. Several of the reviewed studies (Asghar, 2024; Gondal & Hatta, 2024) note that this provincial fragmentation itself contributes to uneven protection: a legal remedy available to a woman in one province may not have an equivalent in another, and awareness of the applicable provincial law among both women and the police officers and judges who apply it varies considerably.

Beyond civil and criminal domestic-violence statutes, the broader legal landscape relevant to this review includes protection-of-women legislation addressing harassment, laws (and continuing reform debates) concerning honor crimes (Shahid et al., 2024), and family law governing marriage, divorce, custody, and inheritance, which shapes the economic stakes of leaving a marriage. Institutionally, implementation depends on a chain of actors police first-responders, prosecutors, family and criminal courts, and, in some provinces, dedicated women's protection or ombudsperson offices each of which the discourse-analytic and access-to-justice literature identifies as a potential point of both support and failure (Khaleel et al., 2024; Siddique & Eze, 2026; Khan et al., 2026). This layered legal landscape is the institutional backdrop against which the social-norms and economic-dependency dynamics discussed throughout this review play out.

2. Theoretical Framework

Four complementary theoretical lenses inform this review, corresponding to the social, economic, legal and cross-cutting dimensions of the problem.

2.1 Social Norms Theory

Social norms theory, as applied in Habib et al. (2024) and Gulesci et al. (2026), explains why individually undesired behavior tolerating abuse persists when it is perceived as widely practiced, expected, or sanctioned within the community. Under this lens, a woman may privately regard violence as wrong while still declining to challenge it, because she believes (often correctly) that her family, neighbors, and community expect her to endure it for the sake of marital stability and family honour. Descriptive norms (what others actually do) and injunctive norms (what others approve of) can operate independently, and interventions that change formal law without shifting perceived community expectations may therefore have limited behavioral effect a dynamic Gulesci et al. (2026) examine directly in the Pakistani legal context.

2.2 Resource and Economic Dependency Theory

Resource and economic dependency theory explains why financial powerlessness constrains women's bargaining position and exit options within marriage (Shah et al., 2025; Bano, 2025). In this framework, a woman's capacity to leave an abusive relationship is modeled as a function of the resources income, assets, education, and social support she can draw on relative to the costs of leaving, including loss of housing, custody risk, and social stigma. Where women's access to independent income is structurally limited, as in much of Pakistan's informal labor sector (Bano, 2025), the theory predicts that even a woman who fully rejects violence-accepting norms may remain in an

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abusive relationship for lack of a viable alternative.

2.3 Feminist Legal Theory and Discourse Analysis

Feminist legal theory and discourse analysis (Khaleel & Ahmed, 2024; Khaleel et al., 2024) explain how law, legal language, and institutional practice can simultaneously claim to protect women while reproducing the very stigma and power asymmetries that domestic-violence legislation was intended to remedy. This lens draws attention not only to what the law formally permits or prohibits, but to how judges, police and lawyers talk and write about victims language that can subtly shift blame onto the woman, question her credibility, or frame violence as a private family matter rather than a criminal act, thereby undermining the practical force of otherwise protective statutes.

2.4 Intersectionality

An intersectional lens, though not the explicit framework of most reviewed studies, is implicit in work that compares outcomes across regions, socioeconomic groups, and rural–urban divides (Khan et al., 2026; Rind et al., 2025). Intersectionality holds that a woman's experience of violence and her access to remedy are shaped jointly by overlapping social positions class, caste-like kinship status, rural or urban residence, and level of education rather than by gender alone. This review treats intersectional variation as an important, currently under-examined, moderating factor across all three of its central themes.

2.5 Toward an Integrated Model

No single theory reviewed here is sufficient on its own: social norms theory explains attitudinal tolerance of violence but not why some economically empowered women still remain in abusive relationships; economic dependency theory explains material constraints but not why some financially independent women still do not report abuse; and legal/discourse theory explains institutional failure but not why some women never approach the legal system in the first place. Section 7 of this review proposes an integrated, three-layer model that treats these theories as complementary rather than competing explanations.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Social Norms, Fatalism, and the Acceptance of Violence

A recurring theme across the reviewed literature is that many Pakistani women do not necessarily fail to recognize abuse, but rather come to frame it as an unavoidable feature of married life a matter of "fate" rather than a violation of rights. Habib et al. (2024), in a multimethod study combining a survey of 308 women, in-depth interviews, and an expert focus group, identify social taboos, distrust of legal authorities, financial dependency on parents, fear of losing custody of children, and sympathy toward the abuser as recurring reasons women do not challenge violent behavior. Their third-phase focus group with legal and social experts further generated six proposed remedies context-specific conflict resolution mechanisms, legal-awareness campaigns, strengthening of socio-cultural and family institutions, educational reform, rights education, and expanded government responsibility illustrating that the same fatalistic framing that sustains tolerance of violence is also recognized by practitioners as a lever for intervention.

Shah et al. (2025) extend this argument by explicitly linking fatalistic attitudes with economic dependence as compounding, mutually reinforcing predictors of continued exposure to abuse within oppressive marriages; in their framing, fatalism is not simply a belief but a coping strategy that becomes more entrenched precisely because material exit options are limited. At the attitudinal level, Ijaz and Butt (2026) show that ambivalent sexism combining hostile and apparently benevolent attitudes toward women and the objectification of women are associated with greater justification of intimate partner violence in Pakistan's patriarchal, collectivist social environment. Their quantitative approach is notable in a literature otherwise dominated by qualitative and doctrinal methods, and suggests

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ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

that attitudinal justification of violence can be measured and modeled with standard psychometric instruments. Asif et al. (2025) approach the same underlying phenomenon from a theological angle, arguing that selective or motivated misinterpretation of religious texts is frequently used to justify patriarchal control and violence, rather than reflecting genuine religious doctrine a distinction with practical significance for community-based awareness interventions, since it suggests that correcting misinterpretation, rather than challenging religious belief itself, may be a more locally acceptable entry point for norm change.

3.2 Economic Dependency

Economic dependency emerges throughout the literature both as a structural condition that traps women in abusive relationships and as a policy lever that could, if addressed, expand women's options. Bano (2025) documents the constraints Pakistani women face in the informal labor sector low pay, lack of legal protection, irregular hours, and limited mobility conditions that, read alongside Shah et al. (2025), help explain why paid work does not automatically translate into the bargaining power needed to leave an abusive marriage: informal-sector income is frequently precarious, undocumented, and subject to appropriation by other household members, which limits its usefulness as a genuine exit resource.

Several legal-policy reviews (Asghar, 2024; Gondal & Hatta, 2024) note that protective legislation rarely addresses the economic dimension of abuse directly, such as control over household income, denial of inheritance, or economic sabotage of a woman's earning capacity, even though economic abuse is repeatedly cited by respondents in the qualitative literature (Habib et al., 2024) as a distinct and disabling form of violence, separate from and sometimes more binding than physical abuse. This creates a policy asymmetry: laws are generally written to penalize physical and, increasingly, psychological abuse, but offer comparatively little practical mechanism such as guaranteed interim maintenance, protected access to marital assets, or fast-tracked inheritance claims for addressing the economic controls that keep a woman from leaving in the first place.

3.3 Legal Framework and Formal Barriers to Justice

A substantial share of the reviewed literature is legal-doctrinal or discourse-analytic in nature. Asghar (2024) reviews the issues and implementation challenges surrounding women's protection legislation, while Gondal and Hatta (2024) similarly catalogue the gap between the existence of rights-protecting laws and their practical enforcement, pointing to under-resourced implementation bodies, low awareness among both women and law-enforcement officials, and inconsistent application across Pakistan's provinces, each of which has its own domestic-violence statute with differing definitions, procedures, and penalties. Azhar (2025) situates women's experience within the broader legal framework governing crime and victimhood, noting that women may be treated as victims in some proceedings and, in cases involving alleged retaliation or self-defence, as criminalized parties in others — a duality that complicates straightforward legal protection.

Qayyum (2025) offers a comparative structural-violence perspective, contrasting Pakistan with South Korea to show how differing institutional environments including differences in state capacity, judicial independence, and civil-society infrastructure shape the prevalence and visibility of both direct and structural violence against women, suggesting that legal reform alone, without institutional capacity-building, is unlikely to be sufficient. At the level of legal language itself, Khaleel and Ahmed (2024) apply discourse analysis to domestic violence legislation, and Khaleel et al. (2024) analyze the linguistic features of rape judgments to demonstrate how judicial language can itself stigmatize victims for example through word choices that imply doubt about a victim's conduct or character reproducing the very social attitudes the law is meant to counter. Gulesci et al. (2026) provide one of the few quantitative, causally oriented evaluations in

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Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

the set, examining empirically how domestic violence legislation interacts with prevailing social norms in Pakistan; their inclusion of a quantitative policy-evaluation design is a notable methodological contribution largely absent from the otherwise doctrinal legal literature, and points toward the kind of empirical legal evaluation this review argues is still in short supply.

3.4 Informal Justice Systems and Socio-Cultural Barriers

Beyond the formal legal system, several studies examine informal mechanisms through which gender-based violence complaints are actually resolved in practice. Farooq and Shehzad (2025) provide a case study of Mansehra City showing how informal justice processes community or family-based arbitration structures resembling jirga or panchayat models often substitute for formal legal recourse, with mixed implications for victims' outcomes: such mechanisms can offer faster, more socially acceptable resolution, but may also prioritize family reconciliation and community harmony over the victim's safety or legal entitlements. Rind et al. (2025) document the socio-cultural barriers, including family pressure, fear of stigma, financial cost of pursuing a case, and lack of legal awareness, that prevent women in District Khairpur Mirs from accessing formal legal help, underscoring that the decision to seek formal justice is shaped as much by anticipated social consequences as by the formal availability of legal remedies.

Siddique and Eze (2026) and Khan et al. (2026) both examine structural barriers to justice more broadly, the latter through a comparative lens contrasting the perceptions of law practitioners with the lived experience of victims in Southern Punjab a comparison that exposes a persistent gap between how the legal system is designed to function and how it is actually experienced by survivors, with practitioners sometimes underestimating the practical and social costs victims face in pursuing a formal complaint. Together, these studies suggest that formal and informal justice systems do not operate independently but interact: a woman's assessment of her prospects within the informal system often shapes whether she attempts to engage the formal system at all.

3.5 Representation, Stigma and Extreme Forms of Violence

A smaller cluster of studies examines how domestic violence and gender-based control are represented in media, literature, and extreme cases such as honour killing. Shahid et al. (2024) review the legal treatment of honour killings and argue for further reform, given continuing gaps between statute including amendments intended to close loopholes allowing victims' families to "forgive" perpetrators and enforcement in practice. Saleem and Shafiq (2025) apply content analysis to Pakistani television dramas, showing how gender, class, and power struggles around domestic control are normalized and, at times, romanticized in popular media, a channel of cultural transmission that operates alongside, and may reinforce, the social norms documented in the attitudinal literature. Saleem et al. (2025) offer a feminist literary critique of female marginality using a Pakistani novel as a case study, illustrating how similar dynamics of control and marginalization are represented in literary as well as broadcast media.

Aziz and Sarwar (2024) and Ahmed et al. (2025) close the loop with broader policy-level and critical mapping perspectives on the political and structural landscape shaping the persistence of violence against women in Pakistan, and Nawaz et al. (2024) frame the cumulative effect of these dynamics as a systemic rights violation "invisible chains" binding women within abusive domestic structures. Nawaz and Johnson (2024) contribute a classificatory lens, applying Johnson's typology (intimate terrorism, situational couple violence, violent resistance, and mutual violent control) to Pakistani cases, a distinction largely absent from the rest of the literature but potentially important for tailoring both legal and social interventions, since the appropriate response to coercive, controlling "intimate terrorism" may differ substantially

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

from the appropriate response to situational conflict.

3.6 Prevalence, Epidemiology and Demographic Correlates

Although most of the reviewed literature is qualitative or doctrinal, Shaikh (2024) provides an important epidemiological anchor, drawing on the nationally representative Pakistan Demographic and Health Surveys of 2012–13 and 2017–18 to estimate the prevalence, correlates, and time trends of intimate partner violence against women. This secondary-data approach allows comparison across survey waves and demographic subgroups (such as education level, wealth quintile, and region) in a way that the smaller qualitative studies in this review cannot. Read alongside the attitudinal work of Habib et al. (2024) and Ijaz and Butt (2026), Shaikh's (2024) survey-based estimates provide the closest available link in the current literature between measured prevalence and the attitudinal and structural explanations proposed elsewhere, even though the PDHS instrument itself was not designed to jointly measure economic dependency or justice-system engagement in the depth this review's proposed framework would require.

3.7 Comparative and International Perspectives

A smaller set of studies situates the Pakistani case within a comparative or international frame. Qayyum (2025), discussed above in relation to structural violence, explicitly contrasts Pakistan with South Korea, offering one of the only cross-national comparisons in the reviewed set and highlighting how differences in economic development, legal tradition, and civil-society strength shape both the prevalence of violence and the practical accessibility of redress. While the remainder of the literature is single-country in focus, several studies implicitly draw on international frameworks social norms theory, Johnson's typology of intimate partner violence, and feminist legal theory that originated in, or have been extensively tested in, other national contexts (Nawaz & Johnson, 2024; Khaleel & Ahmed, 2024). This suggests an opportunity for future research to more explicitly benchmark Pakistani findings against comparable South Asian or Muslim-majority country contexts, where similar social-norm and legal-enforcement dynamics have been documented.

3.8 Definitions and Measurement of Domestic Violence

Because the reviewed studies draw on somewhat different definitions of domestic violence, it is useful to set out the working definitions this review adopts before turning to the summary table. Following the framing implicit across the reviewed literature (Habib et al., 2024; Ijaz & Butt, 2026; Shaikh, 2024), domestic violence is treated here as a pattern of behavior within an intimate or family relationship that includes one or more of four overlapping dimensions: physical violence (hitting, beating, or other bodily harm); psychological or emotional violence (threats, humiliation, isolation, or controlling behavior); economic violence (control over income, denial of access to household resources, sabotage of employment, or denial of inheritance); and sexual violence (coerced or non-consensual sexual activity within marriage). National demographic and health surveys such as those analyzed by Shaikh (2024) typically measure only the first and, to a lesser extent, the second and fourth dimensions, which helps explain why economic violence despite being repeatedly identified as significant in the qualitative literature is comparatively under-measured in the prevalence literature.

A related definitional issue concerns the unit of analysis. Some studies (Habib et al., 2024; Rind et al., 2025) focus on the individual woman's experience and decision-making; others (Asghar, 2024; Gondal & Hatta, 2024) focus on the legal or policy system as the unit of analysis; and still others (Saleem & Shafiq, 2025; Saleem et al., 2025) focus on cultural representation rather than individual experience at all. This review treats these as complementary rather than competing units of analysis, but notes that comparing findings across studies with different units of analysis requires care, and is one reason

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

the summary table below reports methodology explicitly alongside thematic focus.

4. Literature Review Summary Table

Table 1 summarizes the reviewed studies by thematic focus, methodology, key contribution, and identified gap. Methodological characterizations for studies not verified against full text are drawn from the title, abstract, and publication venue; readers intending to cite specific findings should verify against the primary source.

Table 1. Literature Review Summary (2024–2026 Pakistan-focused domestic violence studies)

Author(s) & Year	Thematic Focus	Methodology / Type of Study	Key Contribution	Identified Gap
Habib, Naveed & Akhtar (2024)	Social norms; fatalism; violence acceptance	Multimethod: survey (n=308), in-depth interviews, focus group with legal/social experts	Identifies socio-economic and legal reasons (trust deficit in legal system, financial dependency, fear of losing children) that lead women to accept domestic violence; proposes context-specific remedies	Findings drawn from one district-level sample; limited generalizability; does not statistically model interaction between fatalism and economic dependency
Shah, Shah & Kibria (2025)	Fatalistic attitudes; economic dependence; oppressive marriages	Empirical study (survey/interview based, per title and journal scope)	Links fatalistic worldview and economic dependence as joint predictors of continued exposure to domestic violence	Regional/journal-level study; needs replication with larger, nationally representative samples
Asghar (2024)	Legal framework; women protection laws	Doctrinal/legal-policy analysis	Reviews issues and implementation challenges of women protection legislation in Pakistan	Legal-textual analysis only; lacks victim-perspective or outcome data on how laws function in practice
Farooq & Shehzad (2025)	Informal justice systems; gender-based violence	Case study (Mansehra City)	Explores how jirga/panchayat-style informal mechanisms process gender-based violence complaints	Single-city case study; comparative data across informal vs. formal systems is limited
Asif, Tabassam & Naheed (2025)	Religious/patriarchal interpretation	Islamic critique / textual-theological analysis	Critiques misinterpretation of religious texts as used to justify patriarchal control and violence	Normative/theological argument; not linked to empirical prevalence or victim outcomes
Rind, Wassan	Socio-cultural barriers to legal help-	Field-based analysis (District Khairpur Mirs)	Analyzes intimate partner violence and	Confined to one district in Sindh; rural-urban

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

Author(s) & Year	Thematic Focus	Methodology / Type of Study	Key Contribution	Identified Gap
& Brohi (2025)	seeking		the socio-cultural barriers that prevent women from accessing legal help	comparison not addressed
Ahmed, Hussain & Ahmed (2025)	National landscape of domestic violence	Critical/policy review	Maps the broader policy and structural landscape of domestic violence across Pakistan	Descriptive mapping; lacks a predictive or explanatory model of risk factors
Azhar (2025)	Women and crime; legal framework	Legal and social-context analysis	Examines how the legal framework intersects with women's experiences as both victims and, at times, criminalized parties	Framework-level discussion; limited case-level or statistical evidence
Khan, Khan & Latif (2026)	Structural violence; law practitioners vs. victims	Comparative analysis (Southern Punjab)	Compares perceptions/practice of law practitioners with lived experience of victims	Regional focus (Southern Punjab); practitioner-victim comparison not extended nationally
Siddique & Eze (2026)	Access to justice; GBV cases	Barriers analysis	Identifies structural and procedural barriers women face in pursuing gender-based-violence cases through the justice system	Barrier-focused; does not quantify case attrition or conviction rates
Qayyum (2025)	Structural vs. direct violence (comparative)	Comparative cross-country analysis (Pakistan & South Korea)	Contrasts structural and direct forms of violence against women across two very different socio-legal contexts	Comparative framing is broad; country-specific mechanisms need deeper disaggregation
Aziz & Sarwar (2024)	Women's rights; politics of humanity	Policy/political analysis	Discusses political challenges and proposes solutions for advancing women's rights	High-level policy discussion; limited grounding in field data
Khaleel, Ungku Mohd	Stigma; rape judgments; legal discourse	Linguistic/discourse analysis of court judgments	Shows how language in rape judgments reflects and	Focused on judicial text; does not capture victims' post-judgment

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal

ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

Author(s) & Year	Thematic Focus	Methodology / Type of Study	Key Contribution	Identified Gap
Nordin, Ahmed & Anjum (2024)			reproduces societal stigmatization of victims	experiences
Ijaz & Butt (2026)	Ambivalent sexism; objectification; IPV justification	Quantitative/psychological survey study	Links ambivalent sexism and objectification to justification of intimate partner violence in a patriarchal, collectivist setting	Psychological/attitudinal focus; economic and legal dimensions not integrated
Khaleel & Ahmed (2024)	Domestic violence law; legal discourse	Discourse analysis of domestic legislation	Analyzes how domestic violence law is constructed and framed in legal discourse	Textual/discursive method; no link to enforcement outcomes
Gulesci, Leone & Zafar (2026)	Domestic violence laws and social norms	Quantitative policy-evaluation study	Provides empirical/econometric evidence on how domestic violence legislation interacts with prevailing social norms in Pakistan	One of the few quantitative/causal studies; scope limited to the specific law(s) and period evaluated
Nawaz, Bashir, Habib & Shabbir (2024)	Domestic violence and women's rights ('invisible chains')	Review/conceptual analysis	Frames domestic violence as a systemic rights violation embedded in social structures	Broad conceptual review; not tied to a specific dataset
Nawaz & Johnson (2024)	Typology of domestic violence	Applied theoretical analysis using Johnson's typology	Classifies Pakistani domestic violence cases according to Johnson's typology (intimate terrorism, situational couple violence, etc.)	Typological application; limited empirical validation within the Pakistani sample used
Shaikh (2024)	Prevalence and correlates of IPV	Secondary analysis of Pakistan Demographic and Health Surveys 2012-13 and 2017-18	Provides nationally representative prevalence estimates and trend comparisons of intimate partner	Survey-based, self-report data; does not capture help-seeking or justice-system pathways

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
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Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

Author(s) & Year	Thematic Focus	Methodology / Type of Study	Key Contribution	Identified Gap
			violence	
Gondal & Hatta (2024)	Women's rights laws; challenges and solutions	Policy/legal review	Reviews existing women's-rights legislation and proposes solutions to implementation gaps	Solutions are largely prescriptive; not tested against implementation data
Bano (2025)	Women in the informal labor sector	Exploratory/qualitative study	Explores women's participation and constraints within Pakistan's informal labor sector, relevant to economic dependency	Labor-market focus; not directly linked to domestic violence outcomes in the same study
Shahid, Awan & Rana (2024)	Honour killings	Legal-perspective and reform analysis	Reviews legal perspectives on honour killings and proposes reform directions	Legal/doctrinal analysis; underreporting and enforcement data are not addressed
Saleem & Shafiq (2025)	Media representation; gender and power	Content analysis of Pakistani television dramas	Shows how gender, class, and power struggles around domestic control are depicted in popular media	Media-representation study; does not measure real-world attitudinal effects
Saleem, Cheema & Nazar (2025)	Feminist literary critique	Literary/feminist critique of a novel	Offers a feminist reading of female marginality using a literary case study	Literary analysis; illustrative rather than empirical evidence of social patterns

5. Critical Synthesis and Discussion

5.1 Convergences Across the Literature

Despite differences in method and disciplinary background, the reviewed studies converge on several points. First, there is broad agreement that domestic violence in Pakistan is sustained by more than the individual behavior of perpetrators; it is embedded in family, community and institutional structures that make it costly for women to name, report, or leave abusive relationships (Habib et al., 2024; Nawaz et al., 2024; Ahmed et al., 2025).

Second, economic powerlessness is consistently identified across attitudinal, legal, and labor-market studies alike as a central mechanism keeping women in abusive relationships, even when they recognize the relationship as harmful (Shah et al., 2025; Bano, 2025). Third, legal-doctrinal and discourse-analytic studies converge in finding that the existence of protective legislation is not, by itself, sufficient; implementation, awareness, and the language and attitudes of the officials who apply the law all shape whether legislation translates into practical protection (Asghar, 2024; Gondal & Hatta, 2024; Khaleel et al., 2024).

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

5.2 Divergences and Open Questions

The literature is less unified on several points. Studies differ, for example, in how much weight they place on economic dependency versus social norms as the primary driver of continued abuse: Shah et al. (2025) treat the two as mutually reinforcing, while other studies (Ijaz & Butt, 2026; Asif et al., 2025) foreground attitudinal and ideological explanations with comparatively less attention to material constraints. Similarly, studies of informal justice systems reach mixed conclusions about whether such mechanisms help or harm victims: Farooq and Shehzad (2025) note that informal arbitration can provide faster resolution than an overburdened formal court system, while Rind et al. (2025) emphasize that the same mechanisms can pressure women toward reconciliation over safety. These divergences are not necessarily contradictions they may reflect genuine regional or case-level variation but they underscore the difficulty of drawing firm generalizable conclusions from a set of studies that rarely share a common sample, instrument, or geographic scope.

5.3 Methodological Strengths and Weaknesses of the Reviewed Literature

Methodologically, the reviewed literature's principal strength lies in its qualitative depth: multimethod and interview-based studies such as Habib et al. (2024) surface nuanced, context-specific reasons for violence-accepting behavior that a purely quantitative survey would likely miss. Discourse-analytic studies (Khaleel & Ahmed, 2024; Khaleel et al., 2024) similarly offer a level of insight into how law operates in practice that cannot be captured by statute text alone. The principal weakness is the near-absence of studies that combine breadth (large, representative samples) with depth (validated measurement of norms, economic dependency, and justice engagement) in a single design. Shaikh (2024) achieves breadth through secondary analysis of the Pakistan Demographic and Health Surveys but was not designed to capture the qualitative nuance of help-seeking decisions; Habib et al. (2024) achieves depth but at a scale (308 women, one set of critical cases) that limits generalizability. Gulesci et al. (2026) is the clearest example of a quantitative, causally oriented design in the set, but its scope is bounded by the specific legislative change and period it evaluates. No reviewed study combines a large, multi-district sample with validated multi-item measures of social norms, economic dependency (including economic abuse specifically), and justice-system engagement in one design the gap developed further in Section 6.

6. Research Gap

Reading across the 24 studies summarized above reveals a literature that is thematically rich but methodologically fragmented. Five specific gaps stand out.

6.1 Integration Gap

Social-norms research, economic-dependency research, and legal/justice-access research are almost always conducted separately. No study in the reviewed set jointly and quantitatively models all three dimensions norms, economic dependency, and justice-seeking within a single analytic framework, despite qualitative evidence (Habib et al., 2024; Shah et al., 2025) that they operate together. This matters because policy interventions designed on the basis of a single-factor explanation (for example, a legal-awareness campaign that assumes norm change is the binding constraint) may underperform if economic dependency is, in a given population, the more binding constraint, or vice versa.

6.2 Quantitative and Causal Evidence Gap

The large majority of the reviewed studies are doctrinal, discourse-analytic, or small-sample qualitative work. Gulesci et al. (2026) and Shaikh (2024) are notable exceptions, but neither directly links legal or normative change to individual-level justice-seeking behavior using primary survey data at meaningful scale. As a result, claims about which factor norms, economics or legal barriers exerts the largest practical effect on a woman's likelihood of reporting abuse or leaving an abusive relationship remain largely qualitative and inferential rather than statistically estimated.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
An International Peer-Reviewed Open Access Journal
ISSN (Online): 3006-2071 | ISSN (Print): 3006-2063
Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

6.3 Geographic and Sectoral Concentration

Several studies are confined to single districts or cities (Mansehra, Khairpur Mirs, Southern Punjab), limiting generalizability across Pakistan's diverse provincial, rural–urban, and socioeconomic contexts. Pakistan's four provinces and various administrative territories differ substantially in legal implementation capacity, dominant social structures (such as the relative strength of jirga-style informal justice in parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and interior Sindh), and labor-market conditions, meaning that findings from one district cannot be assumed to generalize nationally.

6.4 Limited Measurement of Economic Abuse

While economic dependency is widely cited as a contributing factor, few studies operationalize or measure economic abuse (e.g., control over income, denial of inheritance, restriction of employment, forced financial dependency) as a distinct construct, separate from general financial hardship or poverty. This conflation makes it difficult to distinguish the effect of a household simply being poor from the effect of a woman specifically being denied economic agency within an otherwise adequately resourced household.

6.5 Underuse of Mixed-Methods and Longitudinal Designs

Existing work is overwhelmingly cross-sectional; no reviewed study follows women over time to assess how the interaction of norms, economic status, and legal engagement changes trajectories of exposure to violence or successful exit. A longitudinal design would allow researchers to observe, for example, whether a woman's entry into paid employment precedes a change in her tolerance of violence-accepting norms, or whether the reverse sequence is more common a distinction with direct implications for whether economic-empowerment programs or norm-change campaigns should be prioritized, or sequenced, in intervention design.

Taken together, these gaps point toward the need for a large-scale, mixed-methods, primary-data study for example, a structured survey and interview study of women recruited across multiple districts that jointly measures social-norm endorsement, economic dependency (including a validated economic-abuse scale), and justice-seeking behavior and outcomes, so that the relative and joint contribution of each factor can be estimated empirically rather than inferred qualitatively.

7. Proposed Conceptual Framework

7.1 The Three-Layer Model

Building on the reviewed literature, this paper proposes a sequential-reinforcing framework in which three domains interact to determine a woman's exposure to, and ability to exit, domestic violence:

- Social Norms Layer: Community- and family-level acceptance of violence, fatalistic attitudes, and ambivalent sexism (Habib et al., 2024; Ijaz & Butt, 2026) shape whether abuse is even labeled as a problem requiring a response.
- Economic Dependency Layer: Control over income, assets, and employment (Bano, 2025; Shah et al., 2025) determines the practical feasibility of leaving an abusive relationship once it is recognized as such.
- Access-to-Justice Layer: Formal legal barriers (Asghar, 2024; Siddique & Eze, 2026) and informal justice mechanisms (Farooq & Shehzad, 2025; Rind et al., 2025) determine whether a woman who wants to leave, and who has some economic means to do so, can actually obtain protection, custody, or redress.

In this framework, each layer can independently suppress action, but the layers also compound: a woman may overcome social stigma and still be trapped by economic dependency; or overcome both and still be denied effective legal protection. The model is deliberately sequential recognition, then capacity, then remedy while allowing for feedback: a failed attempt to obtain legal redress, for example, may itself reinforce fatalistic social norms for the woman involved and for others in her community who observe the outcome.

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
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Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

7.2 Hypothesized Pathways

The framework generates several testable hypotheses for future research. First, women who reject violence-accepting social norms but lack independent economic resources should be more likely to remain in abusive relationships than women who both reject such norms and possess independent resources a norms-by-resources interaction. Second, among women who both reject violence-accepting norms and possess economic resources, actual exit or formal reporting should still be predicted by perceived accessibility of formal and informal justice mechanisms, consistent with the barriers documented by Rind et al. (2025) and Siddique and Eze (2026). Third, exposure to media or community narratives that normalize domestic control (Saleem & Shafiq, 2025) should be associated with higher endorsement of violence-accepting norms, independent of a woman's own economic status.

7.3 Implications for Measurement

Testing this framework requires instruments that do not yet appear to exist in combined form within the reviewed literature: a validated social-norms/fatalism scale (building on the qualitative themes identified by Habib et al., 2024, and the psychometric approach of Ijaz & Butt, 2026), a validated economic-abuse and economic-dependency scale (extending beyond the general poverty measures typically used), and a validated measure of perceived and actual access to justice (drawing on the barrier categories identified by Rind et al., 2025, Farooq & Shehzad, 2025, and Siddique & Eze, 2026). Only once such instruments are fielded together, in the same sample, can the framework's hypothesized interactions be estimated statistically including, at that stage, appropriate predictive modeling of help-seeking or reporting behavior.

8. Policy Implications

Although this review is not a program evaluation, several policy-relevant implications follow from the synthesized literature.

8.1 Legal Awareness Is Necessary but Not Sufficient

Legal-awareness campaigns are necessary but, on the evidence reviewed here, unlikely to be sufficient on their own: Gulesci et al. (2026) and the doctrinal literature (Asghar, 2024; Gondal & Hatta, 2024) together suggest that formal legal change interacts with, rather than automatically overriding, prevailing social norms. A woman who is fully aware of her legal rights may still decline to exercise them if doing so is expected to carry a high social cost within her family or community. This implies that awareness campaigns are likely to be more effective when paired with, rather than substituted for, community-level norm-change work, such as engagement with religious and community leaders on the theological misinterpretations documented by Asif et al. (2025).

8.2 Economic Empowerment as a Complementary Lever

Interventions aimed at improving women's independent economic standing for example, formalizing and protecting informal-sector employment (Bano, 2025) or securing women's inheritance and property rights in practice rather than only in statute may have a distinct and complementary effect to legal-awareness campaigns, consistent with the resource-dependency mechanisms identified by Shah et al. (2025). Because economic dependency and social-norm acceptance appear to be mutually reinforcing rather than independent, programs that address only one are likely to be less effective than programs that address both concurrently.

8.3 Engaging Rather Than Bypassing Informal Justice

Given the documented role of informal justice mechanisms (Farooq & Shehzad, 2025), policy attention directed solely at the formal court system risks missing the point at which many women's cases are actually resolved, or set aside, informally. Engagement with community and family arbitration structures for example through training of community elders and local

JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES
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Volume 4 • Issue 6 • October 2026

mediators on women's legal rights and safety planning rather than an assumption that such structures should simply be bypassed in favor of formal courts, may be a more realistic near-term lever than formal-system reform alone, particularly in districts where formal courts are geographically distant or socially inaccessible to women (Rind et al., 2025).

8.4 Institutional Language and Procedure

The discourse-analytic findings on judicial and legal language (Khaleel et al., 2024; Khaleel & Ahmed, 2024) point toward a comparatively low-cost intervention: training for police, prosecutors, and judges on victim-sensitive language and procedure, which does not require new legislation but addresses a documented mechanism of institutional re-victimization. Standardized intake procedures, victim-sensitive interviewing protocols, and monitoring of judicial language in domestic-violence and rape cases could be implemented within existing institutional structures and budgets, making this among the more immediately actionable recommendations arising from the reviewed literature.

9. Future Research Directions

Future studies should prioritize: (a) validated, multi-item measurement of economic abuse alongside physical and psychological abuse; (b) nationally representative or multi-district sampling to allow provincial and rural–urban comparison; (c) mixed-methods designs combining structured surveys with qualitative interviews, following the model of Habib et al. (2024) but at larger scale; (d) where feasible, longitudinal follow-up to assess how changes in economic status or legal engagement affect trajectories of violence exposure over time; and (e) explicit cross-national benchmarking against comparable South Asian or Muslim-majority contexts, extending the comparative approach of Qayyum (2025). Any quantitative modeling including classification or predictive analysis of which women are more likely to seek formal help should be conducted only once such primary data have been collected, since presenting model outputs (including performance metrics such as ROC/AUC curves) without an underlying empirical dataset would misrepresent illustrative reasoning as evidence-based findings.

11. Conclusion

The Pakistani literature on domestic violence between 2024 and 2026 offers a detailed, if fragmented, picture of how social norms, economic dependency, and barriers to justice interact to sustain violence against women. Social-norms and attitudinal research explains why abuse is tolerated; economic-dependency research explains why it is difficult to leave; and legal, discourse, and informal-justice research explains why formal recourse so often fails to deliver protection. The clearest priority for future research is integration: a single, adequately powered, mixed-methods study that measures all three dimensions in the same sample would allow researchers and policymakers to move from describing these barriers separately to understanding, and eventually intervening on, how they combine to keep women trapped in abusive domestic situations. The three-layer conceptual framework proposed in Section 7, together with the specific measurement and sampling priorities identified in Sections 6 and 9, offers one concrete path toward that integration.

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