

Rape survivors in Pakistan struggle to access justice despite legal reforms, new report finds

Strengthening implementation, evidence gathering and support services can help Pakistan turn legal reforms into effective justice for sexual violence survivors.

KARACHI, PAKISTAN, April 30, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Reforms to expand Pakistan's sexual violence laws, increase penalties, and improve procedures have not translated into better justice or protection for survivors, finds a new report by [Equality Now](#).



Photo credit: Equality Now, Fareeha Ali Yahya

[Legal Response to Sexual Violence in Pakistan](#): Challenges in Enforcement and Access to Justice reveals how poor implementation, long delays in investigations and trials, and illegal out-of-court “compromises” are just some of the factors contributing to a [dismally low 0.5% rape conviction rate](#).

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Jacqui Hunt, Equality Now

Cases are undermined by flawed evidence collection and a shortage of public prosecutors. Victim-blaming is common, with police, prosecutors and courts frequently applying outdated and narrow interpretations of rape and consent. Survivors also struggle to access legal aid, psychosocial care, safe shelters and effective victim and witness protection.

Women and girls from marginalised communities, including Christian and Hindu groups, face higher risks of sexual harassment, abduction and forced religious conversion, including through child marriage. Women with disabilities are reported to be up to three times more likely to experience sexual violence, with discrimination, exclusion and practical barriers making it even harder to navigate Pakistan's justice system.

Equality Now's Jacqui Hunt explains, “Pakistan has strengthened its sexual violence laws and,

while these are welcome changes, it needs now to build on those with effective enforcement. The priority now is consistent legal implementation enabled by better resourcing, training and accountability. Gaps in laws that leave women and girls unprotected must be closed, and state support services improved so that all survivors can receive the justice they are entitled to.”

APPLYING PAKISTAN'S CONSENT-BASED RAPE LAW

Rape in Pakistani law is based on the absence of consent, meaning sexual activity requires free and voluntary agreement. Physical evidence of violence is not needed to prove rape, and survivor testimony alone can be sufficient to secure a conviction.



Despite this, authorities commonly rely on evidence of injury or resistance, and there remains considerable scepticism among law enforcement about whether rape has occurred without proof of physical violence. Some courts wrongly demand this type of corroborative evidence, and although a victim’s sexual history or evidence of “immoral” character is inadmissible, defence lawyers continue to raise questions in cross-examinations to discredit victims.

Equality Now found widespread consensus that sexual violence investigations are weak. Insufficient resources undermine the collection, preservation and analysis of evidence. Police rely heavily on medical verification, such as DNA, and overlook other important forensic and non-forensic evidence.

Strengthening Pakistan’s justice system requires improved evidence collection, investment and coordination between departments. To ensure laws are correctly applied, mandatory training and clear guidance are needed for everyone in the justice system. Better oversight of courtrooms is also essential to address improper evidence demands, rape myths, and prohibited questioning.

RAPE SURVIVORS FACE LONG DELAYS AND DIFFICULTIES ACCESSING SERVICES

The introduction of fast-track mechanisms offers a promising pathway to timely justice, with research finding higher satisfaction among survivors using Gender-Based Violence Courts

compared to regular criminal courts. However, rape cases still routinely experience long delays, procedural problems, and poor coordination between police, prosecutors and Women Medico-Legal Officers (WMLO).

Timely medical examination is critical for gathering evidence. Pakistan's law states that in rape cases, DNA samples must be collected from a victim and the accused during a medico-legal examination. For females, these must be conducted by a WMLO, but a shortage means survivors must often travel far for examinations and are ill-informed about how to preserve evidence.

WMLOs also lack resources to work effectively and need training on legal developments. Many still record whether the victim is a virgin, which is not relevant and reflects harmful social biases that presume a non-virgin is more likely to consent to sexual activity.

Support services remain uneven, especially outside major cities. The Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021, promises legal aid, counselling, and provisions such as Anti-Rape Crisis Cells, intended as one-stop centres for reporting cases and conducting medico-legal examinations. While a promising initiative, they are frequently unavailable. The Act also requires perpetrators to pay survivors compensation, but courts reportedly don't enforce this. A shortage of safe shelters leaves survivors at risk of harm and intimidation.

LEGAL REFORM NEEDED TO STRENGTHEN LAWS ON MARITAL RAPE, INCEST AND CHILD MARRIAGE

Pakistan's law, in principle, treats marital rape the same as rape outside of marriage. However, courts have failed to recognise non-consensual sex within marriage as rape, or have applied legal provisions with significantly lower penalties.

Marital rape remains widely underreported, as does incest, which is a social taboo that is not well recognised or understood in Pakistan. Some courts even express doubts that incest occurs in an Islamic society. Explicitly criminalising marital rape and incest as distinct offences would clarify the law and could encourage reporting.

Each province has its own child marriage law, and inconsistencies in the age of marriage create confusion and loopholes that hinder prosecutions. The Child Marriage Restraint Acts set 18 as the minimum age of marriage for women in Balochistan, Punjab, Sindh and the Islamabad Capital Territory, whereas in KP it remains 16 years. The Christian Marriage Act, 1872, also permits child marriage under 18 if certain procedural requirements are met, such as when a father grants permission.

While some courts rightly recognise child marriage as contravening girls' human rights, others have ruled that under Islamic law, sex within Muslim marriages can be lawful once a girl reaches puberty and is considered capable of consenting, even if she is below Pakistan's legal age of marriage. Harmonising laws to establish 18 as the minimum age of marriage, without exception,

would close protection gaps and remove confusion.

Lawyer and report lead author, Sahar Bandial, concludes, "For survivors of sexual violence, accessing justice and support in Pakistan remains slow, difficult, often retraumatizing and impossible for many. While legal reforms are a vital step, they must now translate into tangible, meaningful change in police stations, courtrooms and communities throughout the country."

About Equality Now: Equality Now is a worldwide human rights organisation dedicated to securing the legal and systemic change needed to end discrimination against all women and girls. Since its inception in 1992, it has played a role in reforming over 130 discriminatory laws, positively impacting the lives of hundreds of millions of women and girls, their communities and nations, both now and for generations to come.

Working with partners at national, regional and global levels, Equality Now draws on deep legal expertise and a diverse range of social, political and cultural perspectives to continue to lead the way in steering, shaping and driving the change needed to achieve enduring gender equality, to the benefit of all.

For more details, go to www.equalitynow.org

Tara Carey

Equality Now

tcarey@equalitynow.org

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