



Women striving for gender equality in Pakistan: greater awareness and state support needed

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Abstract: Pakistani women and minorities have suffered deeply rooted and structural prejudice and violence for decades and more recently a surge of state actors and vigilante predators intimidating women human rights defenders at the forefront of battling gender injustices.

More than four decades since the introduction of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and less than five years before the final curtain on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development's spectacle, Global South countries have barely integrated the core principles of women's rights into their laws and policies. To add salt to the wound, governments continue to pour their misogynist vitriol on women human rights defenders ([WHRDs](#)) who tirelessly work and advocate for women's rights.

Although the rights of those 'defending the rights of others' are reaffirmed in the UN [Declaration](#) on Human Rights Defenders, it was UN General Assembly [Resolution 68/181](#) that boldly tackled the disenfranchisement and persecution of WHRDs. A

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[2024 report](#) submitted during the UN General Assembly detailed how state and non-state perpetrators have spun false narratives and gendered cyberspace attacks against WHRDs. Yet, the looming existence of primordial, religious extremist and conservative norms hindered the progress of gender equality and undermined their voices. This is further evidenced by challenges burdening WHRDs working on [sexual and reproductive health](#) rights, such as restrictions to donor funding, judicial harassment, and 'morality' based stigma.

Pakistan, a [state party](#) to the CEDAW, has an exhaustive list of abuses against [women and girls](#), more so against WHRDs, from reports of sexual violence, incest, forced conversions and forced marriages of [girls under 18](#), to a despicable series of honour killings, some even carried out by [diaspora families](#) in developed countries. Hurling acid at young girls for rejecting marriage proposals or non-payment of dowry is still commonplace, with [over 80 percent](#) of the acid attacks taking place in the northern province of Punjab. Acid is readily available as it is used in delinting cotton seeds, and Punjab is a cotton exporter.

A [2016 survey](#) divulged that in Pakistan, around 48 per cent of organisations working on women's rights received threats while 51 per cent of WHRDs received a threat months before participating in the survey.

Cold-blooded attacks on women's rights activists

From the picturesque mountains of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to the arid deserts of Balochistan, and passing through the hustle and bustle of Islamabad, WHRDs face a multitude of challenges in peacefully exercising their activism. One of Pakistan's most prolific WHRDs in 'herstory' was Malala Yousafzai, a young schoolgirl who pushed for women's right to education and was gunned down by the Taliban in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, then a belligerent bulwark of the Taliban, back in 2012. Her steadfast vision for education gained widespread attention and earned her a Nobel Peace Prize two years later. [Hina Khan](#), another young student dubbed as the 'next Malala,' revealed that the Pakistani government failed to protect her and her family after [receiving threats](#) from the Taliban in 2012. In the same year and province, an alleged pro-Taliban vigilante group shot dead activist [Fareeda 'Kokikhel' Afridi](#) while militants ambushed a vehicle ferrying [four WHRDs](#) in the area bordering Afghanistan in 2021. Several transgender (known as *Khwaja Sira* or *hijra*) activists were either [shot, robbed, or assaulted](#) between 2015 and 2016 in the same province.

In the sprawling city of Islamabad, authorities arrested Defence of Human Rights Pakistan chairwoman Amina Masood Janjua [twice](#) for participating in peaceful protests. In Karachi, [Sabeen Mahmud](#), an artist/cafe owner who helped organise a forum on enforced disappearances in Balochistan, was shot dead in 2015.

In recent times, Balochistan has been revamped into a battlefield for WHRDs speaking up for the self-determination of the Baloch people. In April 2025, authorities [arrested the father](#) of Sabiha Baloch, a member of the *Baloch Yakjehti Committee* (Baloch Solidarity Committee or BYC). Between March and April this year,

other BYC members, such as [Mahrang Baloch](#), who was nominated for Time Magazine's [2024 list](#) of emerging leaders and the 2025 [Nobel Peace Prize](#), [Sammi Deen Baloch](#), [Gulzadi Baloch](#), and [Beebow Baloch](#), were arbitrarily arrested, denied access to legal remedies and family visits and reportedly tortured behind bars.

According to Dr Tayyaba Najib, a Pakistani WHRD and alumna of Mahidol University's Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies:

Due to their intersectionality, WHRDs who are minorities in the state face more violence. Pashtun women, Baloch women, Sindhi women, and especially Christian and Hindu women face more violence due to their ethnicity and their class.

The latest human rights crisis is the probable deportation of 60 Afghan human rights defenders, including WHRDs, after the Pakistani government set a [March 31 deadline](#) for Afghan refugees and asylum seekers to flee the country, transgressing the principle of non-refoulement.

Women's rights crusaders under duress but unfazed

Pakistani women are frequently confronted with structural, cultural and institutional violence at the hands of their families, neighbours and state actors. Emerging stronger after experiencing sexual harassment, doxing and internet surveillance during her storied career, Tayyaba shared some of the challenges faced by WHRDs even at home, a place where they should be safe from the perils of the outside world:

They [women] face sexual harassment, doxing, catcalling and stalking. They are paid less and [have] longer working hours and offices don't provide security...they are challenged with sexual harassment, even from their male counterparts at work. They also face challenges at home and in family life, as certain projects lead to out-of-station work and late hours. They face physical violence at home due to such issues.

Over the past decade, Pakistan has passed laws attempting to reduce, if not eliminate, abuse and exploitation of women, such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, the Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act, and the [Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act](#). In Punjab, which tallied over 730 acid attacks from 2013, is set to pass a [local bill](#) to control the sale of acid.

However, disputes are traditionally settled in either the Federal Shariat Court or tribal courts (*jirgas*), patriarchal values are highly favoured, and men's unhinged sexual innuendos are often normalised, leaving women and WHRDs vulnerable to poverty and violence.

Sehrish Naz, WHRD and founder of [Break The Mold](#), shared that gender pay gaps in some CSOs are a result of gender stereotypes, abuse of authority and flawed perceptions of WHRDs in the development sector. She explained:

WHRDs often work harder to prove themselves, despite having similar qualifications and experience than their male counterparts but are still offered lower salaries and fewer opportunities. Women often struggle to gain equal representation in important spaces as the system remains heavily male-dominated. Lack of support and opportunities undermines their ability to bring about lasting change.

Dismantling gender injustices in Pakistan: A fool's errand?

From warding off assassination attempts by armed groups and sexual advances by lustful men to performing household labour to appease their husbands and in-laws, WHRDs in Pakistan have been unjustly denied their human rights and dignity. Legislation remains toothless because of the presence of rabid and impulsive [conservatives and extremists](#), who contribute to the country's culture of impunity, enfeebling the rule of law.

Sehrish hopes that more grants and funding opportunities can be channelled to support the participation of women's rights groups, while ensuring equal and unhindered access to international events such as policy spaces and capacity-building programmes. She said:

Women from marginalised communities often find themselves excluded from international projects while women from non-representative backgrounds are pushed to the forefront instead. Discrimination in education, workplaces and societal settings continues to undermine their rights and opportunities for empowerment.

Moreover, the Pakistani government must strengthen its enforcement mechanisms and conduct human rights awareness campaigns to increase public understanding of women's rights. Multi-stakeholder collaboration, especially with women's rights groups, is essential in providing legal and procedural remedies for victims of domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment and other abuses. In doing so, the government can inch closer to achieving their aspirations for advancing gender equality, in line with [Sustainable Development Goal 5](#), the [Pact of the Future](#), and the [Istanbul Convention](#).