

The Implication of Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act, 2022, on Domestic Violence Cases: A Critical Analysis of South Punjab

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ABSTRACT: The main objective of this study was to review the implications of the Punjab Protection of Women Against Domestic Violence Act 2022 on the cases of domestic violence in south Punjab. The study is based on several documented cases in three Women Protection Centers of Bahawalpur, Multan and Vehari to examine the provisions of the Act in the context of eight different forms of domestic violence: physical, psychological, economic, digital, property related, etc. The evaluation of the legal provisions of the Act and the socio-cultural factors influencing the implementation of the Act is done by two theories: Feminist Legal Theory and Social Norms Theory. The results show that the Act offers progressive measures, such as protection and residence orders, and financial measures, yet the measures issued and their implementation are greatly hindered by institutional weakness, irregularities in implementation and lack of legal awareness among the population, as well as patriarchal ideals in South Punjab. The study suggests a multi-tiered strategy for seeking meaningful protection of women, including coordination of institutions across sectors, mechanisms for economic empowerment for women, and consistent community-based measures that address gendered norms that foster and tolerate domestic violence.

KEYWORDS: Domestic Violence, Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act 2022, South Punjab, Women Protection Centers, Feminist Legal Theory, Social Norms Theory, Institutional Enforcement, Gender-Based Violence, Legal Implementation

Introduction

Domestic violence against women is a widespread and deeply entrenched social issue that transcends geographical, cultural, and economic boundaries. It encompasses diverse forms of abusive behavior including physical, psychological, emotional, sexual, and economic abuse occurring predominantly within intimate and family relationships (WHO, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) estimates that approximately one in three women globally experiences physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner during their lifetime, underscoring domestic violence as a critical public health and human rights concern.

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In Pakistan, domestic violence remains pervasive despite constitutional guarantees of equality under Article 25 and human dignity under Article 14 (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973). Empirical studies document that women face multiple forms of abuse, with physical assault and emotional neglect being most prevalent within marital relationships (Iqbal & Fatmi, 2018). Cultural norms emphasizing family privacy, women's subordination, and social stigma around seeking outside help discourage survivors from pursuing legal redress, perpetuating cycles of abuse (Pakeeza, 2015; Sattar et al., 2022).

The Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act (PPWVA), originally enacted in 2016 and revised in 2022 (Government of Punjab, 2016, 2022), represents a landmark legal advancement at the provincial level. The Act adopts a comprehensive civil protection approach, offering protection orders, residence orders, financial relief, shelter homes, counseling services, and clearly defined institutional responsibilities (Zia & Hassan, 2023). Its 2022 revision sought to strengthen enforcement mechanisms and enhance access to justice for women across Punjab.

Despite progressive legislation, significant implementation barriers persist. Scholars consistently identify weak institutional capacity, lack of public awareness, poor inter-agency coordination, and patriarchal attitudes among law enforcement and judicial actors as key obstacles (Zubair et al., 2018; Gondal & Hatta, 2024). These challenges are particularly acute in South Punjab, a region characterized by strong patriarchal traditions, socioeconomic disadvantage, low female literacy, and limited access to formal legal and support institutions (Sattar et al., 2022).

This study critically examines the implications of the PPWVA, 2022, on domestic violence cases in South Punjab. By analyzing twelve documented cases from three Women Protection Centers and applying Feminist Legal Theory and Social Norms Theory as analytical lenses, the study evaluates the extent to which the Act provides meaningful protection and identifies barriers to effective implementation at the grassroots level.

Research Objectives

The study pursues the following objectives:

1. To review documented cases registered under the Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act, 2022, in South Punjab.
2. To analyze the effectiveness of the Act in providing legal recourse and protection to women survivors of domestic violence.
3. To explore the socio-cultural challenges that affect the implementation of the Act and attitudes toward domestic violence.

Literature Review

Global and Regional Context of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is recognized internationally as a structural human rights violation rooted in patriarchal power relations and gender inequality (CEDAW, 2017). The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action obligate state parties to enact comprehensive legal measures and institutional responses to eliminate gender-based violence (CEDAW, 2017). Research confirms that legal protection alone is insufficient without institutional capacity, gender-sensitive enforcement, and accompanying social change (Gondal & Hatta, 2024; Sripada, 2020).

In South Asia, despite increased domestic violence legislation in countries including India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, a persistent gap exists between law and implementation. Socio-cultural norms emphasizing family honor, women's subordination, and reliance on informal dispute resolution significantly undermine legal protections for survivors (Sripada, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed structural weaknesses in protective frameworks, with intimate partner violence surging globally in the context of economic stress, lockdowns, and restricted access to support services (Rayhan & Akter, 2021).

Domestic Violence in Pakistan

Domestic violence in Pakistan is multi-dimensional, encompassing physical, psychological, economic, and increasingly digital forms of abuse (Ahmad, S., 2023). Scholars document that violence in the home is frequently normalized through cultural discourses of family honor (izzat), women's obedience, and the expectation that marital conflict remains a private matter (Pakeeza, 2015). These norms create conditions of systematic under-reporting and silence among survivors.

Legal reform efforts at the provincial level have sought to address these realities. The PPWVA, 2022, builds upon earlier legislative efforts by adopting a survivor-centered approach that recognizes the full spectrum of abuse and provides multiple protective remedies. Protection orders prevent further harm; residence orders guard against wrongful eviction; monetary relief addresses economic dependence; and institutional mechanisms including Women Protection Officers, shelter homes, and counseling services provide comprehensive support (Zia & Hassan, 2023).

Critical scholarship, however, highlights persistent implementation failures. Zubair et al. (2018) document systemic issues including inadequate police training, poor coordination between welfare agencies, and limited resources for women's shelters. Recent parliamentary review confirms that even specialized Gender-Based Violence courts face growing case backlogs despite their establishment nationwide, with official data showing a conviction rate of only 5% and 64% of cases ending in acquittal (Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights, as reported in Dawn, 2025). The CEDAW Committee (2017) emphasizes the state's unfulfilled due diligence obligations to prevent, protect, prosecute, and provide reparations for domestic violence.

South Punjab: A Socio-Cultural Context

South Punjab presents a particularly challenging context for domestic violence law implementation. The region is characterized by strong patriarchal family structures, high rates of female economic dependency, low literacy rates among women, and significant geographical distance from formal legal and support institutions (Sattar et al., 2022). Domestic violence in the region is frequently handled through informal dispute resolution mechanisms led by family elders, community notables, and religious leaders, who often prioritize family reconciliation over women's legal rights and physical safety (Rehman, 2010).

Women's access to justice in South Punjab is further constrained by limited knowledge of legal rights, fear of retaliation, social stigma, and economic vulnerability that makes pursuing formal legal action feel impossible or dangerous (Sattar et al., 2022). These structural conditions create a significant research gap regarding how the PPWVA, 2022, functions in practice at the district level in this region.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by two complementary theoretical frameworks. Feminist Legal Theory provides a structural lens for examining how law operates within patriarchal contexts. As Fineman (2013) and West (1988) argue, legal instruments may appear neutral but often fail to account for structural inequalities that disadvantage women, particularly in the private sphere where domestic violence most commonly occurs. The theory explains why legislative reform alone does not guarantee effective protection when institutional practices, enforcement mechanisms, and social attitudes are misaligned with the law's intent (Coker, 2001). Applied to this study, Feminist Legal Theory reveals how women's formal legal rights under the PPWVA, 2022, may be rendered inaccessible through institutional bias, procedural barriers, and patriarchal attitudes among state actors.

Social Norms Theory, drawing on Berkowitz (2003), examines how individual behavior is shaped by perceived group expectations and community standards. In South Punjab, norms around male authority, family honor, shame, and the privatization of domestic conflict discourage reporting, normalize abuse, and shape institutional actors' responses. Together, these frameworks explain the persistence of domestic violence despite formal legal protections and situate the gap between law-in-books and law-in-action within a broader socio-cultural and institutional analysis.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case-study approach grounded in primary case data collected directly by the researcher from three Women Protection Centers in South Punjab. With institutional permission, case records were accessed and reviewed at Center A in Bahawalpur (five cases), Center B in Multan (four cases), and Center C in Vehari (three cases), yielding twelve documented cases in total. This primary case data was supplemented by secondary sources, including the text of the PPWVA 2022, government and institutional reports, media reports from credible outlets, and relevant academic literature.

The analytical framework is structured around the three research objectives. First, documented cases are reviewed to identify patterns of violence, reporting behavior, and access to legal remedies. Second, the Act's effectiveness is assessed by comparing statutory provisions with actual outcomes observed in institutional records and case documentation. Third, socio-cultural barriers shaping implementation are examined through the theoretical frameworks outlined above.

All case identifiers have been anonymized and personal information removed to preserve confidentiality and ensure ethical compliance. Institutional permission was obtained from the respective Women Protection Centers to access case records for research purposes, and the study did not involve direct contact with survivors as research participants. The study is limited by its reliance on institutional case records, which may not fully capture the complexity of individual experiences, and by the availability of detailed case data from South Punjab specifically.

Data Analysis and Findings
Overview of Documented Cases

Twelve cases were analyzed across three Women Protection Centers spanning the period 2022 to 2026. The cases reflect a broad typology of domestic violence prevalent in South Punjab, as summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Summary of Documented Domestic Violence Cases from Three Women Protection Centers (2022–2026)

Case	Assumed Name	Center	Year	Age	Primary Violence Type
1	Amna	A Bahawalpur	2022	~45	Psychological / Social Harassment
2	Sana	A Bahawalpur	2022	~29	Economic Violence / Expulsion from Home
3	Zainab	A Bahawalpur	2023	~23	Physical Violence / Image-Based Digital Abuse
4	Rukhshanda	A Bahawalpur	2024	~50	Property and Inheritance Deprivation
5	Hina	A Bahawalpur	2025	~22	Forced and Fraudulent Marriage
6	Nadia	B Multan	2023	~28	Physical Violence / Police Inaction
7	Farida	B Multan	2024	~35	In-Law Physical and Psychological Abuse
8	Saima	B Multan	2025	~31	Cyberstalking and Digital Harassment
9	Sadia	B Multan	2026	~34	Prolonged Psychological Violence
10	Ayesha	C Vehari	2025	~24	Maintenance Denial / Dowry Recovery
11	Reshma	C Vehari	2026	~30	Long-Term Maintenance Denial/Economic Control
12	Asma	C Vehari	2026	~26	Economic Abandonment / Dowry Retention

Source: Women Protection Centers, South Punjab (2022–2026). All names are assumed for confidentiality

Bahawalpur Center: Cases 1 to 5

The five Bahawalpur cases reveal the diversity of domestic violence forms encountered in both joint and nuclear family settings. Case 1 involving Amna, approximately 45 years old, concerned social harassment and psychological violence by a daughter-in-law's family within a joint household. The case demonstrates that domestic violence extends beyond the spousal relationship to encompass extended family dynamics, a dimension frequently overlooked in policy discourse. The matter was resolved within three months through institutional mediation and community involvement, reflecting both the potential of the Act's mediation mechanisms and the continued reliance on informal support structures in South Punjab.

Case 2 involving Sana, approximately 29 years old, illustrates economic violence through deliberate maintenance withholding and physical eviction from the marital home, compounded by third-party interference from a relative. Sana's economic dependency prevented immediate legal action, underscoring the monetary relief provisions of the Act as critical protective tools. A written maintenance agreement was secured through Women Protection Center intervention, demonstrating that institutional mediation can achieve practical outcomes even outside formal court proceedings.

Case 3 involving Zainab, approximately 23 years old, combined physical assault with image-based digital abuse, where the complainant's photographs were non-consensually shared on social media by her husband. This case illustrates the intersection of domestic violence with technology-mediated gender-based control, a form of abuse not yet explicitly addressed within the Act's statutory provisions. The Women Protection Center facilitated a consent-based divorce within three weeks, demonstrating the Act's capacity to support women's legal right to exit violent marriages when institutional support is accessible and responsive.

Case 4 involving Rukhshanda, approximately 50 years old, concerned post-bereavement property dispossession following her daughter's death from illness. The complainant sought recovery of her deceased daughter's dowry articles from the husband's family. Resolution through oath-based community mediation, while effective in this instance, raises concerns about long-term enforceability. Case 5 involving Hina, approximately 22 years old, presented a case of forced and fraudulent marriage combined with unlawful confinement by a third party who exploited her vulnerable situation. Resolution involved shelter provision, legal counseling, and criminal complaint, highlighting the critical role of shelter facilities in protecting women who lack traditional family protection.

Multan Center: Cases 6 to 9

The four Multan cases collectively expose critical failures of institutional enforcement alongside more complex forms of domestic violence. Case 6 involving Nadia, approximately 28 years old, documented an armed physical attack on a newly appointed government employee, followed by documented police inaction despite formal complaints and medical records submitted to the police station. The Women Protection Center was required to intervene and compel police response. This case illustrates how institutional complicity, potentially linked to the perpetrators' political connections, can nullify statutory protections and represents a secondary form of institutional violence against survivors.

Case 7 involving Farida, approximately 35 years old, documents sustained physical and psychological abuse by in-laws during the husband's absence abroad. Despite formal employment and independent income, Farida remained structurally vulnerable within the patriarchal joint household. This case challenges the assumption that economic

independence alone confers protection and confirms that patriarchal norms embedded within family and institutional structures shape vulnerability independently of individual economic status.

Case 8 involving Saima, approximately 31 years old, represents a case of cyberstalking and non-consensual access to private data by a former partner, requiring both legal protection and sustained institutional follow-up. This case reflects a growing category of technology-mediated gender-based violence that requires explicit statutory recognition and specialized institutional protocols. Case 9 involving Sadia, approximately 34 years old, involved prolonged psychological violence leading to a request for divorce as a protective measure, demonstrating the Act's relevance to non-physical abuse while highlighting the need for integrated mental health support alongside legal remedies.

Vehari Center: Cases 10 to 12

The three Vehari cases consistently illustrate economic violence in the form of maintenance denial and dowry withholding. All three complainants, Ayesha, Reshma, and Asma, sought maintenance recovery, divorce proceedings, and return of dowry articles, reflecting chronic financial control as a dominant form of domestic violence in the region. These cases confirm Sattar et al.'s (2022) finding that economic/financial control is a central mechanism of patriarchal domination in rural Punjab households. Economic deprivation not only causes direct harm but also traps women in dependency, making legal action psychologically and materially difficult to pursue.

The Women Protection Center facilitated inter-institutional coordination, legal counsel, and case registration for all three complainants. These cases collectively establish economic violence as requiring the same level of institutional urgency and expedited procedural response as physical violence, a recognition not yet consistently reflected in enforcement practice.

Cross-Case Analysis

The twelve cases together yield several overarching patterns. First, domestic violence in South Punjab is structurally multi-dimensional. The documented cases encompass physical, psychological, economic, digital, property-related, and institutional forms of violence that frequently co-occur and compound each other. A survivor seeking maintenance recovery may simultaneously face threats, psychological pressure, and resistance from family networks. This multi-dimensionality means that single-remedy interventions are rarely sufficient.

Second, the PPWVA 2022's legal provisions are demonstrably relevant and applicable to the documented cases. Protection orders, residence orders, monetary relief, and institutional support mechanisms all correspond to documented forms of harm. Third, effective implementation is consistently contingent on institutional responsiveness and coordinated follow-up enforcement, both of which remain uneven across the three Centers.

Fourth, economic dependency emerges as a cross-cutting vulnerability factor. Across Center A, B, and C cases, women's limited financial autonomy shapes their ability to seek help, sustain legal proceedings, and resist pressure to reconcile. Fifth, socio-cultural barriers including family honor norms, stigma, and pressure for informal settlement systematically delay help-seeking and weaken post-order compliance in cases across all three Centers. Sixth and finally, Women Protection Centers play an indispensable bridging role between formal legal rights and practical access to justice, particularly in instances where primary institutional actors such as police fail to respond adequately.

Table 2

Types of Violence, Legal Remedies Applied, and Outcome Patterns

Type of Violence	Legal Remedy Under PPWVA 2022	Cases	Outcome Pattern
Physical Violence	Protection Order	1, 3, 6, 7	Partial enforcement gaps observed
Economic / Maintenance Denial	Monetary Relief / Maintenance Order	2, 10, 11, 12	Written agreements; variable compliance
Property / Dowry	Monetary Relief / Residence Order	4, 10, 11, 12	Mediation-based recovery
Forced / Fraudulent Marriage	Shelter + Legal Aid	5	Shelter secured; legal proceedings initiated
Digital / Cyber Abuse	Protection Order + Institutional Follow-Up	3, 8	Partial Act coverage limited for digital abuse
Psychological Violence	Counseling + Legal Redress	7, 9	Divorce facilitated; mental health gap identified
Institutional Failure (Police)	WPC Escalation and Oversight	6	WPC intervention required to activate police response

Source: Compiled from documented case analysis, WPCs South Punjab (2022–2026)

Discussion

The findings affirm that the PPWVA, 2022, is a progressive and contextually relevant legal instrument. Its recognition of domestic violence as a public legal concern rather than a private family matter is particularly significant in South Punjab, where cultural imperatives of family honor systematically suppress reporting and accountability. The Act's multi-dimensional remedy structure addresses the documented range of harm and provides a legal architecture capable of responding to the full complexity of domestic violence as it is actually experienced by survivors.

Through the lens of Feminist Legal Theory, however, the cases collectively demonstrate that formal legal rights do not translate into substantive protection without enabling conditions. Case 6 involving Nadia exemplifies how institutional complicity can render statutory protections meaningless. Despite formal complaints and documented medical evidence of assault, police inaction required Women Protection Center intervention to trigger any institutional response. Case 7 involving Farida illustrates that economic independence does not shield women from patriarchal control embedded within family structures. These findings are consistent with Gondal and Hatta (2024), who argue that legal reform must be accompanied by institutional culture change and enforceable accountability mechanisms.

Social Norms Theory illuminates the persistent patterns of delayed help-seeking observed across all three Centers. Norms around family honor, shame, and the cultural imperative of marital endurance create substantial social pressure on survivors to pursue informal resolution, often at the expense of their legal rights and physical safety (Sripada, 2020). These norms also shape institutional actors' responses. Police officers who share community values may prioritize reconciliation over legal accountability, reproducing informal settlement norms within formal institutional contexts — a pattern consistent with Social Norms Theory's account of how community expectations shape the conduct of institutional actors (Berkowitz, 2003).

Economic violence emerges as particularly prevalent and structurally critical in South Punjab. The maintenance and dowry recovery cases across Centers A and C demonstrate that financial control is simultaneously a mechanism of abuse and a barrier to justice-seeking. Women without independent economic resources face compounded

vulnerability: they are unable to leave abusive situations, sustain legal proceedings, or resist pressure to accept informal settlements that do not provide lasting protection. These findings corroborate Ahmad, et al., (2022) in establishing economic empowerment as inseparable from meaningful legal protection.

The emergence of digital violence in Cases 3 and 8 signals a significant gap in the Act's current statutory framework. Technology-mediated forms of abuse including image-based violence, cyberstalking, and digital harassment require explicit statutory recognition, specialized institutional protocols, and coordinated legal and technological responses, a gap also documented at the national level by Khan, et al., (2025) in their analysis of Pakistan's cyber harassment law regime. As digital access expands in South Punjab, the absence of clear legal provisions for these forms of abuse risks creating a zone of impunity that perpetrators can exploit with limited institutional consequence.

Conclusion

This study critically examined the implications of the Punjab Protection of Women Against Violence Act, 2022, on domestic violence cases in South Punjab through analysis of twelve documented cases from three Women Protection Centers. The findings demonstrate that domestic violence in the region is structurally multi-dimensional, encompassing physical, economic, psychological, digital, and property-related forms of abuse that frequently intersect and compound one another.

The PPWVA 2022 provides a legally robust framework that is demonstrably relevant to survivors' real experiences. Its protective remedies address the documented range of harm. However, the study conclusively demonstrates that the Act's protective potential is constrained by implementation deficits: inconsistent enforcement, insufficient inter-agency coordination, low public legal awareness, inadequate resources for Women Protection Centers, and deeply entrenched patriarchal socio-cultural norms that shape both community behavior and institutional responses.

The study concludes that the PPWVA 2022 can serve as an effective instrument of protection in South Punjab, but only if legal provisions are matched by institutional responsiveness, enforcement follow-up, economic support for survivors, and sustained community-level normative change. Law without enforcement offers survivors formal rights without substantive safety. Achieving meaningful protection requires action at the legal, institutional, and socio-cultural levels simultaneously.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, four interconnected recommendations are proposed.

Mandatory Enforcement and Monitoring of Court Orders: Protection orders, residence orders, and monetary relief directives should be subject to formal compliance monitoring, with immediate legal consequences for non-compliance. Women Protection Officers and courts should actively follow up on all registered cases to ensure ongoing protection and prevent withdrawal of orders under social pressure.

Institutional Accountability and Inter-Agency Coordination: Women Protection Centers, police, courts, and district administrations must operate through structured and formal coordination protocols. Mandatory gender-sensitivity training for all law enforcement and judicial staff is essential. Documented police inaction, as demonstrated in Case 6, must trigger institutional review through higher oversight mechanisms with enforceable consequences.

Economic Protection as a Core Protective Remedy: Maintenance denial, economic abandonment, and dowry withholding must receive the same institutional urgency as physical violence. Expedited procedures for economic relief orders are urgently needed, particularly in cases involving dependent children. The Act's monetary relief provisions should be strengthened by clear timelines and penalties for non-compliance by respondents.

Legal Awareness Campaigns and Community Outreach in South Punjab: Targeted awareness initiatives in rural and semi-urban areas should inform communities about the full scope of the Act's protections, including non-physical forms of abuse such as maintenance refusal, psychological violence, and digital harassment. These campaigns should actively engage community and religious leaders to address normative barriers to reporting alongside legal literacy.

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