

## Women's Safety and Security in Urban Pakistan

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*The study explores the issue of women's security and safety in urban Pakistan. It targets issues that women face in everyday life in cities, including harassment in public transport, unsafe public spaces, restricted mobility, and inadequate enforcement of laws to protect women. The study emphasizes that despite the advancement of awareness and legislative changes, social norms and cultural attitudes, as well as shortcomings in governance, continue to limit women's freedom and their role in city life. It also investigates the contribution of urban infrastructure such as street lighting, public transport, surveillance and safe public spaces to women's feelings of security. The results indicate that policy and institutional accountability, as well as urban planning, are important in improving women's safety in addition to police action. The study concludes that joint action of government, civil society and urban planners is crucial to establish safer cities where women are able to move freely and equally involved in social and economic life. The present study takes a qualitative approach of secondary data analysis based on academic articles, reports and policy documents to analyze women's safety and security in urban Pakistan.*

## 1. Introduction

Issues of women's safety and security in urban Pakistan is a social problem which has immediate impact on the experience and practice of women in urban Pakistan. Cities such as Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad etc. are witnessing a rise in the movement of people for educational, occupational and everyday purposes as the cities are growing and the population is increasing. Females are increasingly present in public spaces and are more visible than ever in this new urban context. This visibility does not always mean safety, though. A lot of women continue to experience harassment, unwanted attention and insecurity in their travels on public transport, walking in streets and in commuters' activities. The experiences they have can foster fear and constrain their independence, in visible and invisible ways (Bajwa, 2018).

It is not simply a matter of isolated cases, but of structural issues in society and urban planning. The lack of street lighting, crowded buses, absence of surveillance and unsafe public infrastructure make urban areas more vulnerable, particularly for women, in many places. Meanwhile, cultural and social norms may allow for harassment to occur or dissuade women from reporting harassment, further weakening accountability. Because of this, many women alter their behavior, modifying their route, staying out of public areas or using other people's transport to get from place to place, to feel safe. This limits their freedom and also impacts their education, job opportunities, and way of life (Salemi, 2025).

The study is part of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) which aims to end discrimination and violence against women, and Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) which calls for cities that are safe, inclusive, and accessible. Both objectives are interdependent, in theory, if a half of the population does not feel safe in the city, it cannot be sustainable. Urbanization in Pakistan has hindered efforts to meet the needs of safety due to high rates of population growth and differential development, making it challenging for infrastructure and governance systems to keep pace in the safety of urban women (Khan, 2025).

There have been some positive measures, including the setting up of women helplines, special transport services, public awareness campaigns and changes to legislation but these have not had a significant impact due to low levels of trust and confidence in the reporting mechanisms, weak enforcement and a lack of coordination. Many women continue to believe that complaints are not considered, or that justice is slow and unreachable. The study of women's safety in urban Pakistan is not just about the identification of problems, but also how

institutions, policies and social attitudes interact on the ground to give rise to women's experiences. This research is designed to draw attention to this reality and how essential it is to provide safer and more inclusive urban environments where women can move freely without fear (Anwar, 2018).

Existing literature suggests that women's safety in Urban Pakistan is influenced by a combination of inadequate urban infrastructure, weak law enforcement, and deeply rooted social and cultural norms. Studies further highlight that improving women's security is essential for achieving gender and building inclusive, sustainable cities. While previous studies have examined issues such as harassment, gender-based violence, and women's mobility in urban Pakistan, they often focus on these factors in isolation. There is limited research that provides a comprehensive analysis on how social norms, urban infrastructure, and institutional responses collectively shape women's safety and security in urban spaces.

## **2. Methodology**

The study designs qualitative research and analyzes secondary data to examine the safety and security of women in the cities of Pakistan. A social constructivist approach was used to examine women's public space experiences and the impact of social and cultural attitudes, urban design and infrastructure, institutional structures, and public services. This study has specifically targeted major urban centers in Pakistan, particularly, Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. Documentation pertaining to this study has been published in peer-reviewed journals, government reports, and policy publications. Thematic analysis was used to address the issues of public street harassment, lack of public transport, poor urban design and infrastructure, insufficient law enforcement, and socio-cultural barriers as the primary concerns. This research seeks to meet targets of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Sustainable Development Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities). The safety of women needs to be understood within the broader frame of sustainable development. There is less scope for ethical issues, given that the research is based on secondary sources. Ethical issues have also been addressed through the citation and adherence to academic integrity.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Major Safety Challenges and Security Concerns Faced by Women in Urban Areas of Pakistan**

Street harassment is one of the most common problems of which women in cities suffer in Pakistan. This encompasses unwanted comments, staring, stalking, inappropriate physical

or verbal conduct in markets, on the streets, at bus stops and shopping centers. Many women must remain vigilant and cautious whenever they move in public areas due to such experiences, which result in fear and discomfort (Bajwa, 2018). (Bajwa, Empirical study on Women Safety Concerns at Public Spaces: Case Study of Lahore, 2018)

### **2.1.1 Inadequate Public Transport System**

Another key concern is public transport. Women are frequently exposed to harassment during travel through overcrowded buses, inadequate or non-existent seating or monitoring systems. Faced with lack of reliable and safe transport, women in many cases have to rely on their male family members for transport, which affects their mobility (Saleemi, 2025).

### **2.1.2 Poor Urban Infrastructure**

The male dominance of urban infrastructure planning and its weak condition are important reasons for women's insecurity. Poor street lighting, disconnection of roads, lack of sidewalks and poorly designed public spaces make it challenging for women to move safely, particularly at early morning or late evening hours. The absence of CCTV cameras in many places contributes to the feeling of vulnerability (Hussain, 2020).

### **2.1.3 Poor Law Enforcement and Judicial System**

Laws have been put in place to protect women but are not enforced. The majority of incidents of harassment and violence are not reported because of the fear of reporting, lack of trust in authorities, or slow legal process. There is a lack of public trust in the justice system due to lack of enforcement and poor follow-up, even if the cases are reported (Zaman, 2024).

### **2.1.4 Social and Cultural Barriers**

Social norms and cultural attitudes also play a major role in women's insecurity. Victims may experience stigma, victim-blaming or silence. This means that incidents are less likely to be reported and unsafe behaviors can go without curtailing in public spaces (Bashir, 2026) abandoned when they were unable to get around on their own or when they lacked social support.

The challenges faced have led to limited mobility for many women in urban areas. They tend to steer clear of some routes, decrease night travel, and limit social and professional interactions. This not only impacts on their independence but also restricts them in their educational and employment opportunities (Anwar, 2018).

## **2.2 How the Social and Cultural Norms Affect the Security of Women In Public Urban Space?**

### **2.2.1 Normalization of Harassment**

Some harassments like staring, catcalling, and making unwanted comments that may be acceptable or ignored as “common behavior” in many Pakistani urban environments. As a result of this normalization, there is no social penalty for the perpetrators and recidivism is likely to occur, and women are placed in unsafe spaces such as public ones, especially during their transition to adulthood and adulthood period (Berik, 2025).

### **2.2.2 The Misogynistic Outlook and Gender Roles**

Patriarchal norms may still characterize women as “private sphere” persons, where their presence in public space is sometimes not as welcome or warranted. This mindset results in unequal treatment, the mobility of women is indirectly governed or questioned and women feel less secure in relation to their mobility alone (Rasheed, 2025).

### **2.2.3 Victim Blaming Culture**

One of the biggest social issues is to believe that women are to blame for harassment for their dress, actions or movement. A culture of victim-blaming does not promote the reporting of incidents or for women to speak up for fear of judgement. Due to this, a significant number of the cases go unreported and unacted upon (Kazmi, 2023). One common reason why woman do not report harassment or violence is because they are afraid to harm their personal or family reputation. Many communities frown on such experiences and this is seen as shameful, encouraging silence and under-reporting. This silence also tacitly gives safe room to unsafe behaviors in public spaces (Khaleel, 2024).

### **2.2.4 Low levels of social support and trust**

Women may not have robust social or institutional support in cases of insecurity in public spaces, due to cultural norms. People lack confidence in authority, and society puts pressure on them to “adjust” instead of addressing problems, so they are less likely to receive assistance and are therefore more vulnerable.

### **2.2.5 Restricted Freedom of Movement**

Women are discouraged from traveling alone, particularly at night or in unfamiliar surroundings, by social norms. This makes them feel dependent and reduces their independence.

Such restrictions over time further limit women's roles in education, employment and public life, contributing to insecurity in urban areas (Saleemi, 2025).

### **2.3 The Effectiveness of Current Laws, Policies and Law Enforcement in Ensuring Women's Protection in Cities**

Pakistan has enacted a number of laws and policies to address the concerns of women related to harassment and violence, such as the Prevention of Harassment of Women Act, 2010, Domestic Violence Act, 2009, and gender-based crimes. These laws on paper offer an excellent basis for women's safety in public and private places. But law is not always implemented on the ground (Asghar, 2024).

#### **2.3.1 Inadequate Laws and Inaction**

Weak implementation of existing legal provisions is one of the key challenges. While laws exist, some are not enforced because of the lack of coordination between institutions, limited human, financial and technical resources, and law enforcement staff's lack of training. Consequently, there are numerous cases of harassment and violence that are not addressed or delayed (Gondal, 2024).

#### **2.3.2 Understanding the Effectiveness of Law Enforcement Agencies**

Police officers have an important role to play in ensuring women safety, but their effectiveness is often doubted. Often victims complain about lack of sensitivity, slow response and not reporting complaints. This undermines the confidence women have in the system, and may dissuade women from reporting crime, resulting in under-reporting of crime (Zaman, 2024).

#### **2.3.3 Court Delays and Lack of Accountability**

As cases are registered the legal process is often slow and complex. Laws have limited deterrent power due to judicial delay, lack of prosecution and low conviction rates. The legal system can have a reduced overall effect on preventing future incidents as offenders may not be held accountable in a timely manner (Gondal, 2024).

#### **2.3.4 Awareness and Accessibility Issues**

Not every woman knows or understands their legal rights or how to report incidents of harassment and violence. Also, the availability of legal assistance and grievance procedures is inadequate, particularly for women with low income. This disconnects between policy and awareness also decreases the impact of existing protections.

In spite of these hurdles, there have been some positive measures taken including: Women helplines, dedicated police units, awareness campaigns. Although these programmes are useful, the outcomes are limited because of the lack of outreach, trust of the public, and uneven implementation of the programmes in different cities (Khan, 2025).

#### **4. Some practical solutions for enhancing Women's Safety in Urban Pakistan**

##### **4.1 Gender-Sensitive Urban Planning**

Women's safety should be actively included in city planning for urban development. This encompasses the creation of safer public spaces, wider pedestrian walkways, visible open areas, and fewer isolated, or poorly connected routes. Cities need to be designed to make it easier to see and to be seen, thereby making public space safer for all.

The right lighting on the streets is one of the most basic and most effective safety measures. Harassment is much less likely to occur when streets, bus stops and public spaces are well lit. High-risk areas and areas with high traffic, when equipped with CCTV cameras, can also enhance monitoring and aid law enforcement in timely response.

##### **4.2 Secure and Dependable Public Transport Systems**

Public transport to be made safer, more women-friendly. This might mean providing separate seating areas if necessary, ensuring that women staff members are used in the transport system, having emergency alert devices and checking buses and stations regularly. The provision of safe and affordable transport can make a significant impact on women's mobility.

##### **4.4 Enhancing Law Enforcement and Fast-Track Justice**

Training all law enforcement agencies to be more gender sensitive in addressing harassment and violence cases. The establishment of fast-track courts for GBV cases can help to shorten the delays in which justice is sought and enhance accountability of perpetrators.

##### **4.5 Awareness Campaigns and Education**

Public awareness campaigns on the need to respect and behave properly in the public spaces are to be organized, with a challenge to harmful social norms. Schools, universities and media have a significant role in raising awareness in the society of gender equality, women's rights and good behavior in public.

#### **4.6 Accessible Reporting Mechanisms**

Reporting systems, including mobile applications, helplines and women-specific complaint centers, should be strengthened and widely promoted, and be easy to use and trusted. The systems should be able to maintain the confidential nature of the information, rapid response and appropriate follow-up to establish public trust.

#### **4.7 Public participation in monitoring activities**

It is important to involve the local community in making neighborhoods safe. Neighborhood policing, community watch schemes and partnership initiatives with third-sector groups can assist in pinpointing high-risk neighborhoods and increase local level accountability.

#### **4.8 Empowerment of Women- Socially and Economically**

Women's empowerment is closely associated with safety over the long term. To enhance the independence and confidence of women for public use, provision of education, employment and public participation can be expanded. This has a direct impact in the achievement of the SDG 5 – Reduce structural inequalities.

### **5. Conclusion**

Finally, it can be concluded that the safety and security of women in urban Pakistan is a serious issue which is significantly related to social system and urban development system. Despite existing laws and some institutional initiatives, women are still subjected to harassment, limited mobility and lack of security in public spaces, as a result of poor law enforcement, insufficient infrastructure and entrenched cultural attitudes. The study points out that these problems are not independent of each other but are interrelated and need an integrated solution, which should be a combination of legal reform, urban planning and social awareness. With the SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) links, it is evident that safe and inclusive cities are crucial for realizing the broader development agendas. The safety of women has to be guaranteed for the realization of urban sustainability. This means that enhancing infrastructure, bolstering law enforcement and influencing social attitudes are all essential measures towards making urban areas more equitable. The overall results highlight the importance of providing women's safety as a policy obligation, as well as a social responsibility. Government institutions, civil society, and communities need to work together to create cities where women can move freely, participate on an equal footing, and live free of fear.

## 5.1 Recommendations

- Installing CCTV cameras in high-risk areas in public spaces, improving street lighting, particularly in bus stops, markets and parks.
- Improve the safe, reliable and women-friendly public transport developing and expanding with the appropriate follow-up and complaint system.
- Increase the effectiveness of law enforcement institutions by training them on gender sensitivity issues, and by ensuring prompt response to cases of harassment.
- Create speedy courts for justice delivery in cases of gender-based violence and/or harassment.
- Implement campaigns to discourage negative cultural practices and respect for women in public places on a national scale.
- Enhance and encourage helplines, mobile apps and women complaint centers, as well as other reporting systems.
- Assess and incorporate gender-responsive planning into any urban development project to create safer and more inclusive cities.

## 5.2 Limitations

- The study mostly relies on secondary data that may not necessarily reflect the latest or up-to-the-minute experience of women in urban Pakistan.
- There is a lack of recent and accurate information regarding gender-based harassment across urban regions, which makes it difficult to further analyses the situation.
- The research is based on general urban contexts and may not completely represent differences between large metropolitan cities and smaller urban centers.
- Gaps in the literature and information may exist due to cultural sensitivity and lack of reporting of harassment incidents.
- This study did not conduct primary data collection (e.g., interviews, surveys), which would have given the opportunity to learn more about lived experiences.

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