

THE SECOND TRIAL: HOW MORAL SCRUTINY SHAPES SURVIVOR'S LIVES IN SOUTH ASIA

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18051651>

Keywords

Women, Moral Scrutiny, South Asia, Survivors, Violence, Mental Health, Social Judgment, Psychological damage, Gender-based violence

Article History

Received: 11 October 2025

Accepted: 21 November 2025

Published: 25 December 2025

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Abstract

In South Asia, women victims of gender-based violence are subjected not only to the trauma caused by the abuser, but also to a second trial, a social judgment that does not only judge their actions, but also character and perceived piety (Niaz, 2004; Karmaliani et al., 2012). It is morally evaluated in two ways, which is why moral judgment sometimes overwhelms the violence, which is the source of psychological damage, and it leads to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and social isolation (Masih et al., 2024). This study foreshadows both the emotional and psychosocial aspects of violence, which is why both the legal frameworks and social and cultural processes affecting the experiences of women should be tackled. It is imperative to identify and address the evils of the second trial in order to achieve meaningful justice, support survivors in a manner that they create their own value, and break the vicious cycle in society.

INTRODUCTION

In most parts of South Asia, a woman who chooses to report gender-based violence is starting a battle that is long way beyond the law system. When a woman shares her experience, she faces another kind of trial; an unofficial but powerful judgment from society. People evaluate her character, her behaviour, and how well she fits cultural and religious expectations of purity (Niaz, 2004). In countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, these social judgments often affect survivors more deeply than the actual violence. Whether she is believed, supported, or rejected depends on how society interprets her story (Karmaliani et al., 2012).

This ethical examination has its strong patriarchal background and cultural ethics, in which women have

the obligation to serve the honor of their families by their behavior, relations and words. Any behaviour that goes against these rules—such as being independent, socialising freely, or making friends outside the approved circle—can lead to gossip, criticism, and even social isolation. Through this, survivors tend to have sustained psychological effects, which are depression, anxiety, fear, and social withdrawal (Masih et al., 2024).

These assumptions in society continue even in such formal institutions. Even the legal and judicial procedures, which have been reorganized to avoid character attacks, often reflect the biases of the culture, which strengthens the emotional baggage of the second trial. Women who have to deal with the

legal system have to struggle not only with the procedural problems but also with the moral examination that is duplicated in police departments, courts, and workplaces.

This paper explores the role of dual pressures of direct abuse and social judgment on women's mental health, social relationships and decision making. This study provides the basis of interventions that include both survivor-centered approaches to the law and culturally sensitive approaches in reducing stigma and creating empathy and tackling the wider societal issues that remain the cause of trauma.

1.1. Violence against Women and its Psychological Effect

South Asian studies show that violence against women is very prevalent with high rates in Pakistan. Domestic violence refers to an ongoing issue, whereby women of varying socioeconomic statuses are being impacted. As Niaz (2004) expounds, mistreatment in a Pakistani family is so rampant in nature that it takes both physical, emotional and verbal manifestations. But it is not only violence that includes physical harm of women. There is emotional abuse, humiliation, threats, intimidation, and limitations of an individual freedom as well and these have severe psychological repercussions. Society does not take much notice of these non-physical types of abuse, but such types of abuse severely affect the mental and emotional condition of a woman.

According to Niaz and Hassan (2006), women in South Asia tend to hold a second-class position as they are restricted by the culture and expectations of the society, which cannot allow them to exercise their independence. Most females are subjected to forced marriages, exploitation and even human trafficking. The psychological outcomes of such experiences can be long term such as trauma, anxiety and depression. Such practices are accepted in society and further encourage the cycle of violence, which leaves women vulnerable and socially marginalized.

According to Karmaliani et al. (2012), the culture and expectations of patriarchy in Pakistan make violence just normal to many women. Since the age of young children, women have been trained to accept abuse and practice family honor above their own safety. Women are conditioned to keep quiet and any form of resistance is usually disapproved of with blame or

even more violence. This internalization of violence works towards the overall underreporting of violence and many women continue to remain silent victims. The social conditioning and cultural pressure develop a situation where abuse is normalized, and the victims feel lonely and unwelcome.

A number of studies point to the severe psychological effect of abuse. According to Niaz (2004), emotional abuse may also do more damage than physical and result in depression, low self-esteem, suicidal feelings, and permanent trauma. Masih et al. (2024) further include that sleep disorders, chronic fatigue, hopelessness, psychosomatic pain, and social withdrawal are common in mistreated women. These impacts tend to last a long time after the abuse has ceased, proving that psychological trauma is long-term.

The Domestic Violence and Quality of Life study also goes ahead to affirm that verbal, emotional, physical, or sexual violence is closely related to depression, anxiety, and stress, which ultimately reduce the quality of life of women. Women who have been abused complain of feeling insecure, lack of confidence and fear, which do not assist in normal functioning and socialization. This fact emphasizes the multi-dimensional effect of violence, which is mental health and social relationships.

There are also long-term psychological effects of sexual harassment and assault. Thurston et al. (2019) identified that women that had been harassed or assaulted reported experiencing a greater number of depression, anxiety, poor sleep, and emotional distress. Akbar and Ghazal (2023) noted that sexual harassment was on the rise in the post-COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan, especially among working women and students. Sexual violence has a general illegal impact on mental health, with increased levels of depression, anxiety and stress associated with the increased cases of harassment. Such results show that abuse, be it domestic, be it in the open or even in the workplace, creates profound emotional pain that in most cases are not seen in the society.

Another very vulnerable population is female domestic workers. According to Waqar Husain et al. (2022), a significant number of housemaids are abused verbally, physically, emotionally, or sexually at their workplaces. Worryingly, over fifty percent of these women had been found to be depressed or

anxious. The vulnerability is further enhanced by the fact that they do not have legal protection and therefore they hardly have any way of seeking justice. This is due to the fact that domestic workers are especially vulnerable to maltreatment, and the resulting psychological impact is devastating due to isolation, financial dependence, and powerlessness.

Besides psycho-social consequences, violence against women has substantial social consequences. The abused women tend to isolate themselves, shun the social environment, and adopt fearful attitudes. The inability to engage fully in society supports powerlessness and segregating feelings. Such evil is promoted through cultural and societal norms that condone violence or command the women to take it. This social rejection adds to the emotional burden of abuse, which makes survivors stuck in a loop of trauma and invisibility.

1.1. Social Stigma, Stigma, and the Second Trial:

Though women suffer direct physical and emotional injury as a result of abuse, there is a second trial, which is as harmful as the first, but involves the scrutiny and stigma of society. The second trial is the ethical examination, accusation, slander and social seclusion through which the victims go through after being abused. Niaz (2004) explains that women are afraid of criticism since society associates their conduct and family decency with the violence they are undergoing. Most women fear that being subjected to abuse and reporting it will create an impression that they welcome or cause the abuse. It has been reported that close to 70 percent of the abused women do not reveal their experiences because of these fears.

The article *Invisible Wounds* notes that in Pakistan, the issue of psychological abuse is often undermined. The motive of many survivors is to keep silent as they are afraid of being rejected or they have no hope that anybody will be on their side. The emotional abuse is frequently underrated by law enforcement and judicial systems, whereas the courts have difficulties evaluating the cases of non-physical harm. This failure to acknowledge them makes women not pursue justice and recreates the impression that their victimization is not significant.

The second trial is also caused by harassment in the open areas. Imtiaz and Kamal (2021) noted that street harassment leads to shame, insecurity, which makes

women reluctant to travel on their own. These experiences are representative of the general trends of male dominance and social domination, with women being the victims but blamed either way. Equally, a study involving college students has shown that a sense of shame and fear contribute to making harassment have a more devastating psychological effect. According to Anwar et al. (2022), guilt is usually internalized by the victims, even when they are not guilty, which exposes them to the risk of PTSD and depression. These effects are further enhanced by social isolation and a deficit of support.

The other dimension of the second trial is the aspect of workplace harassment. According to Thurston et al. (2019), in the workplace, women are also subjected to implicit blame or distrust by their peers when they report about being harassed. The social judgment contributes to the underlying trauma, which forms another strata of emotional distress. In the literature, it is also clear that the reactions of the society often cause more suffering than the original abuse. Instead of showing sympathies and care, survivors are judged on their dressing, behavior, character or way of life.

1.1. Lack of support, Barriers to Reporting, and Institutional Challenges

Such obstacles to reporting abuse are a key issue. As Niaz (2004) draws attention, shame, fear of retaliation, financial reliance, and the fear of leaving children alone are also some of the reasons why many women do not speak. Pressures of silence in the family usually support the lack of access to networks of support in the face of social embarrassment.

According to Karmaliani et al., women are often unaware of their legal rights, and they trust the judicial system to a minimum (2012). The problems of weak law enforcement, slow court processes, and the lack of trauma-focused services render the process of seeking justice extremely challenging to the survivors. Most women continue to be abused instead of seeking legal justice.

The issue of psychological abuse is a special reporting problem. *Invisible Wounds* reveals that emotional abuse is not usually seen by the police and courts as serious, which leaves the victim helpless and discouraged. Those women of lower social status, especially domestic workers, have even greater problems. Economic dependence and low mobility,

which causes fear of losing a job, render it almost impossible to leave abusive settings. The second trial is further strengthened by the absence of effective institutional and social support that contributes to the further agony of the survivors.

The effect of abuse is enhanced by economic vulnerability. Dependent women have less chances of reporting or opposing violence. On the same note, women in low-wage jobs and domestic workers are usually exploited because they are afraid of job loss or becoming homeless. Psychological stress is complicated by the absence of social and legal safety nets because survivors cannot find basic needs to overcome trauma.

The effects of abuse are increased by cultural, social, and psychological factors. The experiences of women are influenced by patriarchal norms, honor codes within the family, and expectations of the society which in most cases compels them to be tolerant to violence. Stigmatization and moral judgment exist in the culture and may further deteriorate the sense of guilt and shame, which worsens the psychological condition (Niaz and Hassan, 2006). The responses of the survivors such as social withdrawal, anxiety, and depression are closely connected with these intersecting factors which are examples of psychological harm not to be divided into a wider social context.

New types of harassment, especially online harassment also contribute to the psychological vulnerability of women. Akbar and Ghazal (2023) note that the increase in online harassment following the COVID-19 pandemic has also generated a new opportunity to abuse. The emotional impact of old-fashioned harassment is represented by the anxiety, stress and fear of being publicly exposed by women. Social judgment is also increased by the digital environment since the harassment cases can be publicly shared or questioned, which imposes even more emotional and social stress.

Some have investigated interventions and coping strategies depending on survivors. Social support, which comprises family, friends and community organizations is also important in reducing the psychological impact of abuse. Masih et al. (2024) emphasize that the degree of depression and anxiety is lower in women who have a high level of social support, which indicates that relationships among

people protect against violence-related trauma. On the other hand, being socially isolated and unable to find support worsens the mental condition, and it develops fear, shame, and helplessness cycles.

Mental health systems and healthcare are also significant. Counseling, therapy, and trauma-informed care can assist survivors to process experiences as well as treat symptoms and to enhance a feeling of agency. Nevertheless, the lack of access to effective support in Pakistan is due to the institutional gaps, such as the lack of mental health resources and awareness of the needs of survivors (Thurston et al., 2019). To enhance the welfare of the survivors, it is important to increase mental health providers and trainers to act on the psychological impacts of violence.

The literature highlights that abuse is widespread, that its psychological impacts are diverse, and social and cultural factors influence the experiences of women. Women in various settings, be it at home, in society, or in the work place, are generally challenged psychologically. Such difficulties are increased by social stigma, inadequate laws, and institutional barriers to reporting. Economic dependence and limited mobility have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable populations, such as domestic workers, women with low-income backgrounds, etc.

The interdisciplinary nature of the interaction between personal experience of trauma, social forces, and the institutional inadequacies is an indication of why holistic knowledge is required. Violence against women is not a private or individual issue but a problem that is highly entrenched in culture, social and economic systems. It is important to note that this interconnectedness is vital in creating effective policies, interventions and support mechanisms that can deal with short-term and long-term effects of abuse.

1.1. Analysis and Discussion

This research clearly recognises violence against women in South Asia as a serious social and psychological issue, several gaps and limitations remain. Most existing studies focus heavily on describing the prevalence and emotional impact of abuse, while far fewer investigate why harmful cultural norms continue unchecked or how power structures benefit from the silence imposed on women. Although

the authors such as Niaz (2004) and Karmaliani et al. (2012) focus on patriarchy and honor culture, they fail to substantively look how institutions such as police, courts, and health care systems support these norms by either doing nothing or being biased. The other limitation is that most of the studies have considered survivors as one group yet they vary depending on their class, income, environment, and employment. Few studies are conducted on the marginalized populations, including domestic workers, like the study by Waqar Husain et al. (2022). Even the research is inclined to the emotional outcomes of violence and less emphasis is laid on the way women resist, cope or even manage their trauma. Moreover, nearly all the studies highlight the suffering of women but seldom mention the attitudes of men, the beliefs in the community and failures of the system that result in the second trial. In spite of these loopholes, the literature has consistently indicated that the consequences of an abusive situation are worse than the violence itself due to social stigma and institutional frailty. The second trial is more holistic and needs an intersectional approach to have the full picture and find the right strategies in prevention and support.

As it is evident in the reviewed literature, the violence against women in South Asia and especially in Pakistan is a widespread issue with significant psychological and social implications. As it has always been observed, abuse is not a physical phenomenon but also an emotional, verbal, and sexual one, which significantly affects the mental health of women (Niaz, 2004; Masih et al., 2024). Cultural and patriarchal standards tend to normalize emotional abuse, humiliation, and lack of autonomy and thus women end up with long-term trauma, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety and other psychosomatic symptoms. This brings out the fact that psychological abuse may be as harmful as physical abuse, or even worse, and there exists a need to have mental health services to be provided alongside legal safeguards.

One of the most significant themes that emerges from the literature is the idea of the second trial when the reactions of the society to abuse tend to make the abuse worse (Niaz, 2004; Imtiaz and Kamal, 2021). Judgment, blame, and stigmatization can victimize women, reinforcing their feelings of shame, guilt, and helplessness. Women being required by the society to

maintain family honor frequently pushes them to silence and internalize the trauma, which isolates them and imposes emotional burdens upon them. The high rate of these social forces in home, public, and workplace settings indicates that violence against women is not a problem that can be dealt with as an individual or a personal affair and that violence against women is highly embedded in the social norm, gender roles, and the institutional practice.

Systemic barriers to seeking help by the survivors are also identified in the literature. Low reporting rates and persistence in the vulnerability are caused by limited awareness of the law, poor enforcement systems, slow court proceedings, and lack of trauma-informed services (Karmaliani et al., 2012; *The Invisible Wounds*). This is especially clear as far as the marginalized populations such as domestic workers are concerned, because they are already at a compounded risk, as they rely on money but do not have legal protections and are often put in intimate working conditions (Waqar Husain et al., 2022). These obstacles indicate the interplay of socio-economic status, gender, and vulnerability, which means that effective interventions should take into consideration not only cultural norms but also structural inequalities.

Moreover, the considered literature indicates an increase in work, as well as social harassment, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic and that such experiences are correlated with an increase in psychological discomfort among women (Akbar and Ghazal, 2023; Thurston et al., 2019). This points to the fact that although domestic abuse is a severe issue, social drivers in the society, including professional settings, social places, and social developments during the pandemic, influence the mental health of women to a considerable extent. Violence against women, therefore, must be perceived as a multidimensional phenomenon that crosses domestic dimensions and borders and overlaps with the areas of the public, social and institutional.

On the whole, the literature reveals that it is highly necessary to develop comprehensive strategies to address violence against women. The interventions should not be reduced only to physical safety, but they should focus on mental health support, legal empowerment, and raising awareness in the society. The policies aiming at minimizing stigma,

encouraging trauma-informed services, and disrupting the patriarchal and cultural principles that make abuse the norm should be applied. All the analyzed literature proves that in the absence of systemic transformation and cultural support, the emotional and psychological trauma of violence will continue to reside long after the physical attacks of the abuser and create a continuum of trauma, fear, and marginalization.

1.1. Policy Recommendations

According to the results of the given study, the following recommendations are offered to handle the both psychological and social aspects of violence against women in South Asia:

Enhance psychosocial support services: Governments, NGOs and community organizations should focus on trauma-informed mental health services as a survivor. Women may undergo counseling, therapy, and support groups to work through the experiences and thereby restore self-esteem and overcome the psychological effects of the abuse (Masih et al., 2024). Such services must be culturally aware and made at the local levels to enable women of all socioeconomic backgrounds to have access to them.

Advance social awareness programs: Social awareness programs need to oppose the norms of the patriarchal society, social stigma, and moral policing that contribute to the further aggravation of the second trial. The communities should also be informed about the realities of abuse, psychological effects of moral judgment, and necessity to support victims instead of insinuating them, through campaigns (Karmaliani et al., 2012). It is possible to involve religious leaders, media specialists, and educators to make the society change the perception and normalize compassion and sympathy with survivors.

Improve institutional responsibility: Police, judges, and administrators of workplaces must have regular gender sensitivity training, traumatizing practice training, and training on the psychological impacts of abuse. The institutions should be proactive in ensuring that the bias of societal nature is not copied in court and working practice and that psychological and emotional abuse should be taken as seriously as the physical abuse (Waqar Husain et al., 2022). There should also be mechanisms of monitoring

institutional responses and adherence to survivor-centered practices.

Educate schools to respond to gender-based violence: The education should be introduced in schools and to girls and boys to understand the types of abuse and what to do to empower the victims and end gender-based violence. By early education, change can be brought to the societal level, to question the norms of patriarchy and to eliminate the stigmatizing of disclosure, a culture can develop where people believe and support the survivors since childhood.

Enforce legal systems and justice: Although legislative changes are there, the application of the changes is usually uneven. Governments would want to see to it that there is a consistency in enforcement of laws against women being abused, harassed, and subjected to character attacks but the marginalized groups like domestic workers should be prioritized. The access to justice can be enhanced through simplification of the reporting process, providing legal support and decreasing the bureaucratic delays during the process of justice, which significantly decrease the psychological burden of approaching the legal system.

Encourage community-based support systems: Local support systems such as women groups, survivor groups and community advocates can offer emotional and practical assistance to survivors. The networks would be able to alleviate isolation, assist survivors to overcome social and legal obstacles and help extend the message that they are not alone in their fight.

These suggestions will focus on violence against women, which is a complex problem that can be resolved by integrating legal reforms, education, institutional responsibility, and community intervention. The combination of psychological, social and legal interventions is necessary to reduce the long term trauma of both primary and secondary moral examination, in order to provide the survivors with support, belief and empowerment.

Conclusion

This paper emphasizes that violence against women in South Asia, especially in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, is not only prevalent but also embedded in social, cultural, and institutional structures (Niaz, 2004; Masih et al., 2024). Women suffer violence in various forms, such as physical, emotional, verbal, sexual, but these sufferings have long-term and

significant psychological consequences. Patriarchal systems tend to endorse emotional abuse, humiliation, intimidation, lack of personal liberty, which means that women have to internalize trauma and acquire long-term mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and psychosomatic symptoms (Masih et al., 2024; Waqar Husain et al., 2022). This paper highlights that, while some physical injuries are visible, the psychological and emotional effects of abuse can be deeper, long-lasting, and often overlooked by society and institutions.

One of the major contributions of the study is the conceptualization of the second trial whereby survivors are exposed to high levels of scrutiny and moral judgment in the society after violence. Since the moment when a woman reveals abuse, she can be judged by her family members, neighbours, colleagues, and even by the media, who can judge her behaviour, her clothes, relations, and the way she is pious to the social and religious norms (Karmaliani et al., 2012). This kind of scrutiny puts the victim in the limelight of the perpetrator, and her ethical character is a marker of reliability and backing. In South Asia, these social conventions enforced the ideal that women are expected to uphold honor in the family by obeying, being modest and conforming. Lack of conformity to these expectations, e.g. independence, social freedom, or relationships with men, is commonly employed to undermine the credibility of the survivors and to minimize the severity of the violence toward them.

These biases are usually reproduced by the institutional structures, in spite of legal changes made to prevent women against character-related assaults in case of sexual violence and harassment. Police officers, lawyers, and occasionally judges can use the identical moral reasoning that most people in the general society have, which creates the courts that reflect the same suspicion and judgment available to the survivors on the community level (Niaz, 2004; Karmaliani et al., 2012). This cultural imitation of social discrimination further increases the emotional stress of the survivors and many of them feel lonely, unattended, and unwilling to communicate about the abuse. Existence of legal protection does not suffice to tackle psychological and social aspects of violence against women, unless it is done in a culturally

sensitive manner and awareness about the issue is created within the society.

The literature also points out that the marginalized populations, including female domestic workers, are also compounded by financial dependence, inability to have legal protection, and social isolation (Waqar Husain et al., 2022). Such women frequently suffer various types of abuse at their workplaces, but there are few ways that they can resort to. Psychological distress increases their inability to live in abusive environments, which results in the development of long-term trauma and social withdrawal. In the same vein, females in workplaces or academic institutions usually are harassed, which, along with the fear of social stigma and the effects related to professional life, leads to anxiety, the lack of self-confidence, and social shyness (Masih et al., 2024). The increase in harassment in the post-pandemic social settings makes an additional testimony to the weakness of women both in the realm of the domestic world and in the realms of both the community and the workplace (Akbar and Ghazal, 2023).

All in all, the paper has shown that the psychological and social impacts of violence are multi-layered. Not only do the survivors experience the direct impact of abuse but they must also struggle with the judgments that permeate the society and the institutions that perpetuate stigma, shame and doubt. These second trials have far-reaching consequences on the mental health of the survivors, the relations of the survivors, and their decision-making in the future, developing their abilities to cope with the normal life. The results highlight both the dire necessity of interventions that would focus on the immediate and structural causes of trauma, covering the disparities in legal provisions and social realities.

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