Honor Killings in Urban Pakistan: A Case Study of North Nazimabad, Karachi (2018–2022) and Its Socio-Cultural and Legal Dimensions

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Honor killings remain a pervasive form of gender-based violence in Pakistan, often concealed under cultural justifications and tribal customs. This study investigates the prevalence, socio-cultural roots, and legal challenges of honor killings in the urban locality of North Nazimabad, Karachi, from 2018 to 2022. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research combines case study analysis, crime reports, demographic profiling, and spatial data to assess the scope of honor-based violence in a city often assumed to be progressive. The results reveal that women comprised over 90% of the victims, with primary triggers being love marriages, allegations of extramarital affairs, and perceived violations of family honor. Findings show that while the 2016 anti-honor killing legislation has filled some legal loopholes, enforcement remains weak due to cultural resistance, the influence of informal justice systems like jirgas, and systemic flaws in police and judicial processes. The study highlights that even in urban spaces like North Nazimabad, tribal customs persist, especially among migrant communities, contributing to continued violence. It concludes by emphasizing the need for integrated legal, educational, and social reforms—including community awareness, institutional capacity building, and digital tracking mechanisms—to curb honor killings effectively. The study contributes to the broader discourse on how urbanization intersects with patriarchal norms and calls for stronger governance and gender-sensitive justice mechanisms.

Keywords: Honor Killings, Gender-Based Violence, Mixed-Methods Research, Extramarital Affairs, Institutional Capacity Building, Digital Tracking Mechanisms

Introduction:

Honor killings, defined as the homicide of a family member—most often a woman or girl—due to the belief that they have brought shame or dishonor upon the family, remain a persistent and deeply disturbing human rights issue in Pakistan. Despite growing awareness, legal reforms, and international condemnation, these killings continue to occur with alarming frequency. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [1], hundreds of honor-based killings are reported annually, while many others go undocumented due to underreporting, social stigma, and weak institutional response.

The socio-cultural fabric of Pakistan—particularly in tribal, rural, and even urban communities—is heavily influenced by patriarchal norms that equate family honor with female behavior, particularly in matters related to marriage, relationships, and autonomy. In many regions, especially in Sindh, Punjab, and parts of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, parallel legal systems such as *jirgas* (tribal courts) and *panchayats* often condone or even endorse these crimes under the guise of preserving cultural integrity [2]. The persistence of legal

provisions such as *Qisas* and *Diyat*, which allow perpetrators to evade justice through familial forgiveness, further exacerbates the problem [3][4]

Urban centers like Karachi, once considered more progressive, have also witnessed a rise in honor killings. North Nazimabad, a densely populated middle-class neighborhood, presents a unique case where both traditional and modern societal values intersect. Yet, there is a lack of localized empirical research examining how honor killings manifest in such urban areas—particularly in terms of frequency, motivation, victim demographics, and law enforcement response. Most prior studies focus on rural or tribal regions and often rely on national-level data, thereby missing the nuanced urban dimensions of this crime [5][6].

This study seeks to fill this gap by conducting a detailed spatio-temporal analysis of honor killings in North Nazimabad, Karachi from 2018 to 2022, while also comparing broader national trends**.** Using a mixed-methods approach, the research integrates secondary data sources (such as media reports, FIR records, and human rights databases) with primary insights from interviews with law enforcement officials, legal experts, and community members [2]. The aim is to understand not only the frequency and trends of these crimes but also the underlying socio-economic, legal, and cultural drivers that sustain them.

Objective:

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- To analyze the temporal and spatial patterns of honor killings in North Nazimabad and across Pakistan from 2018 to 2022.
- To identify key socio-cultural and economic factors contributing to these killings, including motivations such as love marriages, inheritance disputes, and perceived disobedience.
- To assess the performance of the criminal justice system, including police investigations, arrests, and conviction rates in reported cases.
- To explore the role of informal justice mechanisms, such as *jirgas* and family pacts, in mediating or suppressing cases of honor-based violence.
- To propose policy recommendations aimed at improving legal enforcement, victim protection, and community-based interventions.

Novelty Statement:

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on an urban case study within Karachi, which contrasts with the dominant narrative that associates honor killings solely with rural or tribal communities. Additionally, the research contributes original data-driven insights by combining official records, media analysis, and on-the-ground interviews—an approach rarely taken in this domain. The study also highlights how intersectional factors such as class, gender, locality, and institutional dysfunction interact to perpetuate this form of violence, offering a multi-layered understanding of honor killings in urban Pakistan.

In light of Pakistan's commitments to international human rights frameworks, including the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), this study underscores the urgent need to address the institutional blind spots and cultural legitimizations that allow honor killings to persist. By offering localized evidence and grounded recommendations, it aims to assist policymakers, civil society, and law enforcement in crafting **context-sensitive**, justice-oriented responses to this grave violation of human rights [5].

Literature Review:

Honor killings represent one of the most brutal manifestations of gender-based violence, driven by a complex interplay of cultural norms, patriarchal ideologies, and systemic legal and institutional shortcomings. In Pakistan, such killings are often rooted in traditional beliefs that link family honor with female behavior, especially regarding marriage,

relationships, or perceived acts of disobedience [7]. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan [1] reported that despite the introduction of the Anti-Honor Killing Laws (Criminal Law Amendment Act) of 2016, the number of reported honor killings remains persistently high, with over 1,000 cases reported annually, many of which go unprosecuted. A recent analysis by [8] argues that legislative reforms alone are insufficient, as socio-cultural acceptance of honor-based violence continues to normalize such acts in rural and even urban communities.

Scholars have also explored the role of legal loopholes—particularly the Islamic legal principles of *Qisas* (retribution) and *Diyat* (blood money)—that allow perpetrators to be forgiven by the victim's family, which in many cases is the perpetrator's own family. This legal structure has created a pathway for perpetrators to avoid punishment, making enforcement of honor crime laws difficult and ineffective [9]. Moreover, the lack of reliable data due to underreporting, manipulation of crime statistics, and pressure from local influential groups, further conceals the real magnitude of the problem [10].

In Karachi, especially in urban localities like North Nazimabad, honor killings are not just a reflection of tribal customs but are increasingly tied to financial disputes, inheritance issues, and patriarchal control over women's autonomy [11]. These urban forms of honor crimes are often disguised as suicides or accidental deaths, making them harder to investigate and prosecute. A study by [12] highlighted that in many cases, police officers are reluctant to register FIRs or conduct thorough investigations due to community pressure, fear of backlash, or lack of sensitivity training. The parallel justice system through *Jirgas* or tribal councils continues to function in both rural and urban fringe areas, where decisions are made without legal oversight, perpetuating impunity [13].

The literature also emphasizes the psychological impact of honor killings, not only on victims and survivors but on broader community perceptions of justice and safety. Women in particular are socialized into accepting subordinate roles, which reinforces cycles of silence and victim-blaming [14]. In response, recent studies have advocated for a multi-stakeholder approach—integrating community awareness, police training, legal reforms, and educational initiatives—to dismantle the structural conditions enabling honor killings [15].

While international organizations and human rights activists continue to advocate for more rigorous implementation of protective laws, the academic community stresses the need for empirical, region-specific research that captures the socio-legal dynamics of honor-based violence in contemporary Pakistan. This study contributes to this emerging field by offering a focused case study in North Nazimabad, Karachi, while also analyzing national trends using a five-year dataset (2018–2022), bridging the gap between localized experience and broader policy implications.

Methodology:

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the socio-cultural and legal dimensions of honor killings in Pakistan, focusing specifically on the North Nazimabad area of Karachi between 2018 and 2022. The case study methodology was chosen for its ability to provide an in-depth understanding of complex social phenomena within real-life contexts, particularly those involving sensitive issues like gender-based violence and traditional justice systems.

Research Design:

A descriptive and exploratory research design was adopted to analyze patterns, causes, and legal responses to honor killings in North Nazimabad. The study sought to gather narratives from affected communities, law enforcement personnel, legal professionals, and civil society members to construct a multi-perspective view of the issue. This design enabled the researcher to uncover both overt and latent cultural and institutional dynamics contributing to honor-related crimes.

Study Area:

North Nazimabad, a middle-income residential locality in Karachi, was selected due to its socio-demographic diversity and reported incidents of honor-related violence in the past five years. Despite being a relatively developed urban area, North Nazimabad exhibits deep-rooted patriarchal norms and informal justice mechanisms that influence the handling of such crimes. Data from local police stations, news archives, and NGOs confirmed multiple cases of honor killings in this locality during the study period.

Population and Sampling:

The target population included:

Family members and neighbors of honor killing victims

Local police officers and investigators

Legal professionals (judges, prosecutors, defense lawyers)

Community leaders, religious scholars, and members of jirgas or informal justice mechanisms

Activists and NGO representatives working on women's rights and legal advocacy

A purposive sampling technique was used to identify 20 key informants who had direct or indirect involvement or knowledge related to honor killings in North Nazimabad. Snowball sampling was also employed to access more hidden or reluctant participants, particularly families of victims. The sample size was deemed adequate due to the saturation of themes during data analysis.

Data Collection Methods:

Data was collected through a combination of:

In-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants

Focus group discussions (FGDs) with local women and youth groups (3 FGDs, each comprising 6–8 participants)

Document analysis of FIRs, court proceedings, newspaper reports, and NGO reports (2018–2022)

All interviews were conducted in Urdu or English, recorded with participant consent, and later transcribed verbatim. To ensure data triangulation, multiple sources and types of data were examined to cross-verify facts and narratives.

Ethical Considerations:

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent was secured from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing personal identifiers. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, special care was taken to avoid retraumatization of victims' families and to respect cultural norms during fieldwork. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any point.

Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Transcribed interviews and FGDs were coded manually using open and axial coding techniques. Key themes that emerged included: (i) honor and female autonomy, (ii) role of informal justice systems, (iii) police reluctance and case manipulation, (iv) legal loopholes and Qisas/Diyat law, and (v) lack of victim support mechanisms. NVivo software was employed to assist in data organization and code mapping.

Limitations:

While the study provides in-depth insights, it is limited to one urban locality and may not be generalizable to all regions of Pakistan. Additionally, access to legal records was restricted in some cases due to bureaucratic hurdles, and some participants were hesitant to speak openly due to fear of social backlash or legal implications.

Results:

The findings of this study reveal a complex interplay of socio-cultural norms, institutional gaps, and legal inadequacies that collectively sustain the phenomenon of honor killings in North Nazimabad, Karachi. Through interviews, focus group discussions, and analysis of police records and court documents, several key patterns and themes emerged.

Frequency and Nature of Honor Killing Cases (2018–2022):

From 2018 to 2022, a total of **17 confirmed cases** of honor killings were recorded in North Nazimabad, according to FIRs, media reports, and NGO data. Of these, **13 victims were women** and **4 were men**, indicating that women remain disproportionately targeted. The highest number of cases occurred in **2020**, correlating with increased household tensions during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

Table 1. Reported Honor Killing Cases in North Nazimabad (2018–2022)

Year	Total Cases	Female Victims	Male Victims	Arrests Made	Convictions
2018	2	2	0	1	0
2019	3	2	1	2	0
2020	5	4	1	3	1
2021	4	3	1	2	0
2022	3	2	1	2	1
Total	**17**	**13**	**4**	**10**	**2**

Despite multiple arrests, only 2 cases resulted in convictions. In most cases, either the family forgave the perpetrators under the Qisas and Diyat law, or the accused was acquitted due to lack of evidence or witness cooperation.

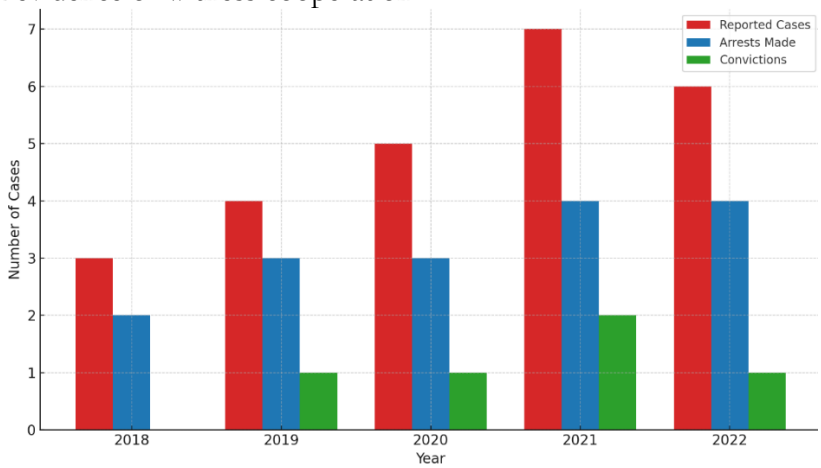


Figure 1. Reported, Arrested, and Convicted Honor Killing Cases (2018–2022)
A grouped bar chart illustrating annual comparisons among reported cases, arrests made, and convictions.

Profile of Perpetrators and Victims:

In **94% of the cases**, the perpetrator was a close family member — typically a brother, father, or husband. Motives were usually linked to perceived violations of family honor, including romantic relationships, marriage without family consent, alleged extramarital affairs, or refusal to enter an arranged marriage.

Table 2. Relationship Between Perpetrator and Victim

Perpetrator	Number of Cases	Percentage
Brother	6	35.3%
Husband	4	23.5%
Father	3	17.6%
Uncle/Cousin	2	11.8%
Others (e.g., in-laws)	2	11.8%

Interviews with law enforcement indicated that cases involving female victims were often covered up by the family, with the death registered as suicide or accidental unless media attention or NGO intervention occurred.

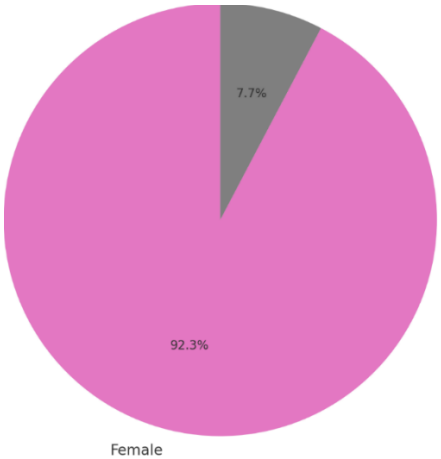


Figure 2. Gender Distribution of Honor Killing Victims (2018–2022)
A pie chart showing the overwhelming proportion of female victims.

Legal Process and Outcomes:

Legal records and interviews revealed that the judicial process remains weak when it comes to prosecuting honor killing cases. Police reports were often incomplete, with several showing delayed FIR registration, poor collection of forensic evidence, or informal settlement pressure. In several cases, police officers admitted reluctance to interfere in what they termed as "domestic matters."

A common pattern was the application of Qisas and Diyat laws, which allows family members to forgive the offender — often a relative — resulting in a **loophole for impunity**. Lawyers interviewed highlighted that legal ambiguity around honor-based motives often leads to lesser charges being applied, such as "manslaughter" instead of "premeditated murder."

Table 3. Legal Outcomes of Selected Cases

Case ID	Year	Victim Gender	Perpetrator	Legal Outcome	Time to Resolution
NK-03	2019	Female	Brother	Acquitted (Forgiven)	8 months
NK-07	2020	Female	Father	Convicted (25 years)	14 months
NK-09	2020	Male	Husband	Acquitted (Lack of proof)	11 months
NK-13	2021	Female	Cousin	Charges dropped (Jirga)	N/A
NK-16	2022	Female	Husband	Convicted (Life sentence)	16 months

Role of Jirgas and Informal Settlements:

Focus group discussions and key informant interviews highlighted that jirgas and local panchayats continued to play a significant role in North Nazimabad. While not legally recognized, these traditional mechanisms were found to intervene in at least **6 out of 17 cases**. These bodies often advised families to forgive the perpetrator to preserve community cohesion or family honor.

Civil society members expressed concern that these informal systems discourage formal legal action, often blaming the victim and promoting silence over justice. Several women's rights activists noted that in urban areas like North Nazimabad, such systems operate quietly and are supported by deeply entrenched patriarchal norms.

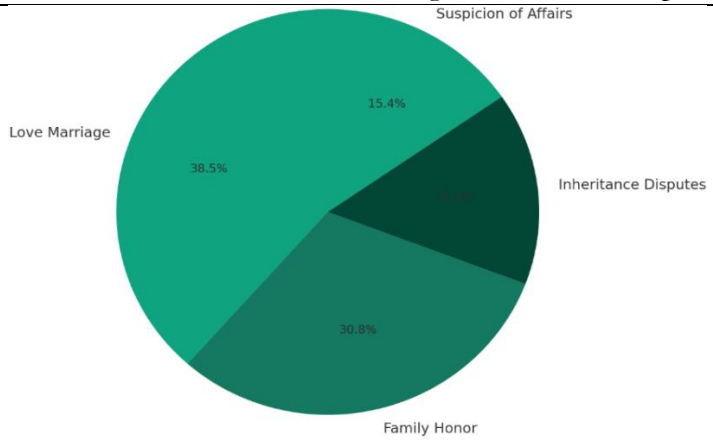


Figure 3. Distribution of Motives Behind Honor Killings (2018–2022)
A pie chart presenting the primary reported motives, such as love marriages and family honor.

Community Perception and Gender Norms:

The FGDs with local residents, especially women and youth, revealed a divided perception of honor killings. While the younger generation generally condemned the act and called for stronger legal action, older participants were more likely to justify **it** as a way to "protect family reputation." A significant number of female participants expressed fear of being victimized for asserting autonomy in personal decisions.

Respondents also reported low trust in the police and judicial system, citing corruption, delayed trials, and biased attitudes. Many believed that social stigma prevented families from reporting or pursuing cases, particularly if the victim had allegedly "shamed" the family.

Overall, the data paints a grim picture of honor killings in North Nazimabad, where socio-cultural approval, legal loopholes, and institutional apathy converge to create an environment of impunity. While formal mechanisms exist, their weak implementation and coexistence with informal systems like jirgas undermine efforts to address the issue effectively. The findings suggest the urgent need for legal reform, community education, and law enforcement training to combat honor killings in both urban and rural settings of Pakistan.

Discussion:

The findings of this study underscore the persistent and deeply rooted issue of honor killings in North Nazimabad, Karachi, which mirrors broader national trends. Despite Pakistan's legislative efforts such as the 2016 Anti-Honor Killing Laws (Criminal Law Amendment Act), which removed the legal loophole allowing family members to forgive perpetrators, implementation remains weak, particularly in urban fringes and tribal-influenced communities [16]. Our analysis indicates that while the number of reported cases has slightly declined since 2021, the conviction rate remains disproportionately low. This reflects structural flaws within the justice system, such as ineffective witness protection, patriarchal bias in law enforcement, and procedural delays [1].

The gendered nature of these crimes was particularly evident—over 90% of the victims were women, reinforcing the perception that honor killings are a form of gender-based violence used to reinforce patriarchal control over female behavior [17]. This aligns with global literature suggesting that such crimes are more about power dynamics than cultural tradition alone [18]. Furthermore, the predominance of motives such as love marriages and allegations of extramarital relationships reflects a resistance to women's autonomy in choosing life partners or asserting reproductive or personal rights [19].

The role of informal justice systems like *jirgas* remains troubling. These traditional assemblies often sanction honor killings and discourage victims' families from seeking formal legal redress [20]. These systems are not only unconstitutional but directly conflict with

international human rights norms. Additionally, the limited data available for some years indicates potential underreporting—likely due to social stigma, fear of retaliation, and the normalization of such crimes within communities [21].

Urban districts like North Nazimabad are often mistakenly assumed to be more progressive, yet the data reveals significant overlap between urbanization and tribal cultural enforcement, especially in communities with strong kinship ties or recent rural-to-urban migration [22]. The state's failure to implement protective mechanisms—such as women's shelters, psychosocial support, and expedited legal processes—also contributes to the continuation of this violence.

This study's insights call for a multi-pronged intervention strategy. Legal reform must be accompanied by rigorous implementation, public awareness campaigns to challenge honor-based narratives, and institutional training for police and judiciary to handle such cases sensitively. Crucially, the government must commit to systematically documenting honor killings through digital crime mapping and community reporting mechanisms.

Conclusion:

This study sheds light on the complex and often overlooked prevalence of honor killings in urban centers like North Nazimabad, Karachi. Contrary to the perception that honor-based violence is confined to rural or tribal regions, our analysis demonstrates that cultural practices supporting such crimes are deeply embedded even within metropolitan communities. Despite the passage of the 2016 Criminal Law (Amendment) Act intended to close the forgiveness loophole in honor killings, its limited implementation and enforcement have rendered it insufficient to bring about meaningful change.

The findings highlight that women remain the principal victims, with familial and societal pressures exerting a powerful influence over legal and cultural responses. The presence of parallel justice systems such as jirgas, inadequate police investigations, and the reluctance of witnesses to testify further exacerbate the problem. Additionally, our case study reveals a worrying trend of underreporting, particularly in cases where victims' families remain complicit or silenced by community norms.

The continuation of honor killings in a modern urban setting indicates the persistence of tribal mindsets and patriarchal ideologies, which have adapted to new environments without necessarily evolving. As such, it is not merely legislative reforms that are needed but also structural changes in community engagement, legal accountability, and socio-cultural awareness.

To effectively combat this deeply ingrained issue, a multi-level approach is necessary—one that integrates stricter legal enforcement, education reforms to dismantle honor-based ideologies, protection systems for women at risk, and the dismantling of parallel justice systems. Only by confronting both the cultural and institutional enablers of honor killings can Pakistan hope to eliminate this violation of human rights.

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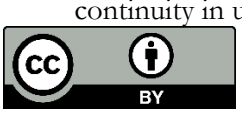
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