

THE VEILED WAR: STATE, PATRIARCHY, AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN SOUTH PUNJAB (1980-2000)

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ABSTRACT

This essay investigates the entrenchment of domestic violence against women in South Punjab, Pakistan, during the pivotal decades of 1980 to 2000. We propose that the escalation of such violence was not a mere aggregation of private, familial disputes but rather the direct and intended consequence of a state-driven project of legal and social engineering. This project, initiated under General Zia-ul-Haq's regime, institutionalized gender-based discrimination through a series of laws, most notably the 1979 Hudood Ordinances and the 1984 Qanun-e-Shahadat. These legal instruments devalued female testimony, criminalized victims of sexual assault, and fortified patriarchal control over women's bodies and autonomy. We argue that the subsequent democratic governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, hampered by political instability and conservative alliances, fundamentally failed to dismantle this discriminatory architecture. This state-level failure allowed pre-existing feudal and patriarchal norms in South Punjab to flourish, creating an environment of impunity for perpetrators. Drawing on a methodological triangulation of legal history, literary analysis of Tahira Iqbal's *Neeli Bar*, and qualitative interview testimonies from women in the region, this study demonstrates how the convergence of state policy, economic dependency, and socio-cultural tradition created a "perfect storm" of oppression. The findings reveal a landscape where violence was normalized, women's access to justice was systematically obstructed, and the silence of victims was enforced through both legal and social mechanisms. This research reframes domestic violence in the region not as a cultural inevitability but as a calculated outcome of modern state power.

KEYWORDS: South Punjab, Domestic Violence, Hudood Ordinances, Patriarchy, Legal History, Zia-ul-Haq

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.65463/52>

The assault against a woman within her own home has long been shrouded in a deliberate, culturally enforced silence, relegated to the "private sphere" and deemed beyond the purview of public or legal concern. This privatization of violence is, I suggest, one of the most powerful tools for its perpetuation. In the context of Pakistan, and specifically the South Punjab region, the period from 1980 to 2000 represents a critical historical juncture where this private violence was actively nurtured and legally fortified by public policy. I propose that the epidemic of domestic violence in South Punjab during these two decades was not a passive social failing but the logical and devastating outcome of state-sponsored legal and political structures reinforcing deep-seated patriarchal and feudal traditions. This was not violence by neglect; it was violence by design.

The larger debate surrounding women's rights in Pakistan is often, and correctly, framed by the catastrophic legal legacy of General Zia-ul-Haq's military dictatorship. His campaign of "Islamization" was, in practice, a campaign of social control enacted primarily upon the bodies and rights of women. While the urban centres witnessed the birth of a courageous feminist resistance, the impact of these laws in rural and feudal societies like South Punjab was profoundly different. Here, the new discriminatory laws did not just introduce oppression; they provided divine and state sanction to the patriarchal control that had already defined the region for centuries. The feudal lord, the *pir*, the tribal elder, and the common man were all handed new, powerful legal tools to enforce submission.

To analyse this phenomenon, I have structured this essay to trace the roots and consequences of this state-patriarchal

alliance. I will first establish the historical and colonial foundations of gender discrimination, demonstrating the "pre-loaded" conditions that existed before 1980. Following this, I will meticulously deconstruct the legal architecture of the Zia regime, focusing on the Hudood Ordinances and Qanun-e-Shahadat as the central pillars of this new oppressive framework. I will then examine the "democratic decade" (1988-1999), arguing that the governments of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, despite their profound political differences, presided over a period of systemic failure in which these discriminatory laws were left intact. Finally, I will turn to the case study of South Punjab itself, using literary analysis and qualitative interview data to illustrate the human cost of these policies, showing how law, culture, and economic dependency converged to make violence an inescapable reality for countless women.

The scholarly discourse on gender-based violence in South Asia is robust, providing a crucial framework for understanding the mechanisms of oppression. Works like Mamta Mehrotra's *Crimes against Women in India* (2014) provide a broad survey of dowry violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking, critiquing the inadequate implementation of legal protections. Similarly, Yanyi K. Djamba and Sitawa R. Kimuna's *Gender-Based Violence: Perspectives from Africa, the Middle East, and India* (2015) offers a comparative perspective, identifying patriarchy, economic dependency, and law security systems as common accelerants of violence. Other scholars, such as Prem Misir in *The Subaltern Indian Woman* (2018), have focused on the intersection of patriarchy with caste and class, demonstrating how historical and socio-economic inequalities compound the

marginalization of women. These studies establish a clear consensus that gender violence is a structural, not just an individual, problem.

Within Pakistan, the scholarship is dominated by several seminal works that directly inform my own. Samya Burney's *Crime or Custom? Violence against Women in Pakistan* (1999) was a landmark report that powerfully analysed how discriminatory legal systems and cultural traditions conspire to deny women justice. Burney argues that practices like forced marriage and honour killing are enabled by legal exceptions and societal acceptance (Burney 1999, 10-15). Building on this, Nafisa Shah's *Honour Unmasked* (2017) presents a transformative ethnographic study, arguing that honour crimes are not merely "cultural" but are deeply entwined with state institutions and feudal power structures. Shah demonstrates how law enforcement and local judiciaries often collude to protect perpetrators, framing murder as a "family matter" (Shah 2017, 45-50). While these essential works provide a national framework, I suggest they lack a specific, sustained historical analysis of the South Punjab region during the pivotal 1980-2000 period. My research addresses this lacuna by connecting the macro-legal history of the Zia and post-Zia eras directly to the localized, lived realities of women in South Punjab.

To capture the complex interplay of law, culture, and lived experience, I employ a qualitative methodology grounded in an intersectional theoretical framework. Originally coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality posits that forms of oppression—such as those based on race, gender, and class—are not isolated but interconnect and compound one another

(Crenshaw 1991, 1244). I apply this lens to examine how the women of South Punjab are subjected to simultaneous and interlocking oppressions: gender-based patriarchy, class-based feudalism and economic dependency, and state-sanctioned discrimination through the legal system. I argue that one cannot understand the domestic violence in the region by looking at gender alone; it must be seen through this multi-layered prism.

My method for data collection and analysis is narrative and historical triangulation. First, I conduct a historical-legal analysis of the primary-source legal texts from 1979 to 1999, including parliamentary debates, ordinances, and constitutional amendments. Second, I use narrative analysis, as modelled by scholars like Brenda J. Child, to interpret literary representations of the region. I treat Tahira Iqbal's novel *Neeli Bar* (2022) as a rich socio-political text that documents the cultural and linguistic norms of South Punjab, particularly its articulation of political misogyny and verbal abuse. Third, I draw upon a series of semi-structured, qualitative interviews I conducted with women from various districts in South Punjab, all of whom are over the age of forty and had lived experience of the period in question (Zain 2024). This triangulation of formal law, literary representation, and lived testimony allows me to construct a multi-dimensional and human-centric history, moving beyond dry legalism to understand the real-world impact of state policies.

THE HISTORICAL FOUNDATION: COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL LEGACIES

The legal and social oppression of women in South Punjab during the 1980s was not a spontaneous generation; it was built upon a deep and stable foundation of historical patriarchy, first codified in the ancient past and later adopted and refined by the British colonial state. While some historical narratives point to a pre-Aryan period of matriarchal respect, the dominant textual history of the subcontinent, as codified in texts like the *Manusmriti*, is one of rigid patriarchal control (Mehta 1987, 11). These texts institutionalized gender discrimination, supporting child marriage, forbidding widow remarriage, and conceptualizing women as the property of their fathers and husbands. I suggest this textual authority provided a powerful, centuries-old justification for the social stratification that would later define regions like South Punjab.

This "ideology of control" was manifested in brutal cultural practices. The medieval period saw the rise of customs like *Sati* (widow-burning) and *Jauhar* (mass self-immolation to avoid capture), which, I argue, functioned as extreme expressions of patriarchal honour, valuing a woman's "purity" over her life (Kumar 2014, 05). While often depicted as acts of noble sacrifice, they represented the total extraction of female autonomy. Similarly, the widespread adoption of *purdah* (veiling and seclusion) served to systematically remove women from public life, restricting their access to education, economic participation, and political influence. Even exceptional figures like Razia Sultan, who governed the Delhi Sultanate, faced immense criticism from a patriarchal elite, proving that her rule

was an exception that reinforced the rule of male dominance (Chaurasia 2002, 10-13).

The arrival of the British colonial government introduced a profound contradiction. On the one hand, the British projected an image of "civilizing" reform, most notably by outlawing *Sati* in 1829 and passing the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act in 1856 (Carroll 1983, 363-388). I propose, however, that these public-facing reforms were a strategic façade. While intervening in high-profile "barbaric" customs, the colonial state simultaneously and assiduously avoided interfering in the realm of personal and family law. This was a calculated decision, as I argue it allowed the British to maintain control by reinforcing the authority of local patriarchs—the very *zamindars* (landowners) and feudal lords who formed the backbone of colonial governance in regions like Punjab (Sarkar 2001, 57).

This colonial strategy solidified male authority through the introduction of a new, "modern" legal framework. The Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1860, for example, set the age of consent for marriage as low as ten years old, legally sanctioning child marriage (Sarkar 2001, 57). Furthermore, the Guardians and Wards Act of 1890 legally cemented the father as the "natural guardian" of his children, effectively rendering women and children as legal dependents, if not property (Parashar 1992, 45). This colonial legal architecture, which privileged male authority under the guise of respecting "native custom," was the direct inheritance of the newly independent state of Pakistan in 1947.

From 1947 to 1977, Pakistan struggled with this contradictory legacy. The 1973 Constitution, passed under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, enshrined a nominal promise of

gender equality in its Article 25. However, this constitutional promise existed in constant tension with the deeply embedded patriarchal norms of the judiciary, the bureaucracy, and the powerful feudal lobby. The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (MFLO) of 1961, for instance, was a tentative step toward regulating divorce and polygamy but was fiercely resisted by religious parties, who view it as an infringement on divine law (Mehfooz and Aziz 2020, 23-34). This gap between the state's modernist aspirations and the society's conservative reality created a volatile political environment. It was this unresolved tension that General Zia-ul-Haq would exploit so devastatingly upon seizing power in 1977, unleashing a new era where state law would no longer just *tolerate* patriarchy, but actively *enforce* it.

THE ZIA REGIME: INSTITUTIONALIZING MISOGYNY (1977-1988)

General Zia-ul-Haq's 1977 military coup and subsequent eleven-year dictatorship represent the single most catastrophic period for women's rights in Pakistan's history. To legitimize his unconstitutional rule and consolidate power against his populist predecessor, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Zia required a powerful ideology. He found it in a severe, state-enforced interpretation of Islam, forged in alliance with fundamentalist parties like the Jamaat-e-Islami. I argue that this "Islamization" project was, at its core, a political strategy that required a visible, symbolic target, and women became that target. The regime's famous slogan of '*chadar aur chardvari*' (the veil and the four walls of the home) was not merely a call for modesty; it was a political directive to erase women from public life and legally cement their subordinate status (Jalal 1991, 80-82).

The primary legal bludgeon used to enact this vision was the 1979 Hudood Ordinances. This set of laws replaced sections of the colonial-era Pakistan Penal Code with what was purported to be Islamic criminal law. The most nefarious of these was the Offence of Zina (Enforcement of Hudood) Ordinance, which governed sexual crimes. I contend that this law was a masterpiece of legal misogyny. It infamously conflated *Zina* (adultery or fornication, a consensual act) with *Zina-bil-Jabr* (rape, a violent crime). The Ordinance prescribed severe *hadd* (Quranic) punishments, including stoning to death, but set an impossible standard of proof for rape: the testimony of four adult male Muslim witnesses of good character who had witnessed the act of penetration itself (Rahman and Cheema 2008, 33-37). In the absence of this evidence, a woman's accusation of rape could be, and often was, dismissed.

The practical effect of this law was the *de facto* criminalization of rape victims. A woman who reported a rape but failed to meet the impossible burden of proof had, by her own testimony, admitted to intercourse outside of marriage. She could therefore be prosecuted for *Zina*. This legal trap was sprung on countless women. The case of Safia Bibi, a young, blind domestic servant who was raped by her employers, became an international scandal. She was convicted of *Zina* and sentenced to be publicly whipped, a verdict so outrageous it was eventually overturned by the Federal Shariat Court after immense pressure from women's groups (Quraishi 1996, 287). In South Punjab, the effect was immediate and chilling. In 1983, a woman named Lal Mai from Bahawalpur was publicly whipped on suspicion of adultery, sending a clear message of terror and submission to women

throughout the region (Rosenbloom 1995, 243).

The Hudood Ordinances directly resulted in a massive increase in the incarceration of women. I suggest this statistic is one of the clearest indicators of the law's true function. As Asma Jahangir noted, in Punjab province alone, the number of women incarcerated, mostly on *Zina* charges, skyrocketed from approximately 70 in 1980 to over 6,000 by 1988 (Jehangir 2004). This was not a reflection of a sudden epidemic of female "immorality," but a clear demonstration of the state's new, powerful capacity to police and punish women. It created a powerful tool for men to control "their" women; a mere accusation of *Zina*, or the threat of one, could be used to silence a disobedient wife, daughter, or sister.

If the Hudood Ordinances were the regime's "stick," the Qanun-e-Shahadat (Law of Evidence) of 1984 was its ideological core. This law replaced the 1872 Evidence Act, and its most notorious provision, Article 17, stated that in financial matters, the evidence of two women was required to equal that of one man. While the law technically excluded *hadd* punishments (like those for *Zina*) from this rule, I argue that its cultural and judicial impact was devastating. It wrote into law the concept that a woman's word, her very perception of reality, was inherently less valuable than a man's (Burney 1999, 12). This legal principle resonated powerfully in courtrooms and police stations, making it even harder for women to be believed when reporting any crime, particularly domestic violence.

This legal framework was supported by a relentless campaign of cultural policing. The state, I argue, actively sought to make women's public presence a mark of shame.

A government directive was issued mandating that female state employees, including PTV newsreaders, must cover their heads. Advertisements were censored to remove "morally corrupting" images of women, restricting them to domestic roles like washing clothes (Jafar 2005, 39). In Multan, an incident was reported where a woman was physically assaulted by zealots for not wearing a headcover, an act of public vigilantism encouraged by the state's rhetoric (Jafar 2005, 41). The state was effectively licensing private individuals to enforce its patriarchal vision.

This open assault on women's rights did not go unanswered. In the urban centres of Lahore and Karachi, it sparked the birth of a courageous and defiant feminist movement. The Women's Action Forum (WAF) was formed in 1982 by a group of professional women, lawyers, and activists. They took to the streets to protest the Hudood Ordinances and the Qanun-e-Shahadat, facing down police batons and mass arrests (Mumtaz and Shaheed 1987, 103). WAF's resistance was heroic and essential, as it provided a powerful counter-narrative to the state's propaganda. However, I must emphasize that this was an overwhelmingly urban, educated, and elite-led movement. For the vast majority of women in rural, feudal areas like South Punjab, there was no WAF. There was only the reinforced power of the local *wadera* (feudal lord) and the district cleric, now backed by the full, punitive power of the state.

THE "DEMOCRATIC DECADE": POLITICAL STAGNATION (1988-1999)

The death of General Zia in 1988 and the subsequent return of democracy brought a profound, if fleeting, sense of hope. The

election of Benazir Bhutto as the first female prime minister of a Muslim-majority nation was a moment of immense symbolic power. Yet, I argue that this symbolism ultimately masked a decade of profound political stagnation and systemic failure for women's rights. The "democratic decade" was characterized by a bitter political struggle between Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML-N), a rivalry that consumed all political oxygen and left the discriminatory legal architecture of the Zia regime almost entirely intact.

Benazir Bhutto's two terms (1988-1990, 1993-1996) were defined by their political fragility. Her government never commanded the two-thirds majority required to repeal the Hudood Ordinances or the 8th Amendment (which gave the President, a Zia-appointee, the power to dismiss her government). Faced with a hostile opposition, a skeptical military establishment, and powerful conservative allies, her administration, I argue, made the political calculation that women's rights were an expendable cause (Azeem, Rifat, and Serfraz 2020, 10). The promise of reform dissolved into a series of minor, symbolic gestures that had no meaningful impact on the lives of most women, especially those in rural South Punjab.

Her government, for example, elevated the Women's Division to a full-fledged Ministry and established the First Women's Development Bank (Lamb 1991, 16-18). While laudable, these were urban-centric initiatives, "boutique" reforms that were woefully underfunded. The Bank's branches were in major cities, inaccessible to the vast majority of women who were trapped in cycles of rural poverty and economic dependence.

Her government signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1996, but with so many reservations that it was rendered toothless. Meanwhile, she offered no symbolic opposition to the Hudood Ordinances, presenting no bill to repeal them, likely for fear of being branded "anti-Islamic" by her opponents.

The horrific reality is that violence against women continued unabated, and in some cases, new forms emerged. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), an independent watchdog, reported in 1993 that, on average, eight women were victims of violence every single day (Ruane 2000, 15-23). The 1990s saw the terrifying rise of "stove burning" or "bride burning." I propose that this phenomenon was a direct evolution of dowry-related violence and so-called "honour killings," where a woman's death would be disguised as a kitchen accident (Coker 1992, 5). The perpetrators, often the husband or in-laws, knew that a compliant local police force would readily accept the "accident" narrative, especially since the victim's testimony was legally devalued.

The two regimes of Nawaz Sharif (1990-1993, 1997-1999) offered no relief; in fact, they represented a conservative continuation of the Zia legacy. Sharif was Zia's political protégé, and his IJI coalition in the first term was packed with the same religious parties that had drafted the discriminatory laws. His government had absolutely no political incentive to repeal the Hudood Ordinances. Instead, I argue that Sharif's legislative agenda was focused on further consolidating power by "out-Islamizing" his opponents, with women's rights treated as mere collateral damage in this political game.

In 1991, Sharif's government passed the Shariah Bill, which aimed to strengthen Islamic rule, though critics dismissed it as a rhetorical move to appease his conservative base. More alarmingly, during his second term, his government introduced the 15th Amendment Bill in 1998. This "Shariah Bill" would have granted the Prime Minister sleeping new powers to enforce his interpretation of Islamic law, a move that critics feared would have been a "constitutional dictatorship" and would have further eroded the status of women and minorities (Mahmood and Nasir 2018, 73-74). Though the bill passed the National Assembly, it stalled in the Senate and died with his government's dismissal in 1999.

Throughout this entire democratic decade, the legal and social framework in South Punjab remained brutally effective. A 1998 HRCP report specifically highlighted the districts of Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, and Bahawalpur, noting that "nearly half of the 82 murders of women... are domestic killings" (Pande 2000, 71). The report detailed that women are killed by their fathers, brothers, and husbands for "refusing to become a prostitute" or for "being unable to conceive" (Pande 2000, 71). Furthermore, data on "stove burnings" from 1998-1999 revealed that over 560 women are burned in their homes in Punjab alone (Constable 2000, A01). This, I argue, is the ultimate legacy of the 1980-2000 period: a state that legally disempowered women and a political class that, for two decades, failed to protect them.

THE LIVED REALITY: NARRATIVES FROM SOUTH PUNJAB

The true impact of this legal and political history is not fully captured in statistics or

parliamentary reports; it is written in the lives and on the bodies of the women who endured it. I suggest that the literary and oral testimonies from South Punjab provide the most crucial evidence for understanding this period. They translate the abstract language of law into the concrete, daily reality of oppression. Tahira Iqbal's 2022 novel, *Neeli Bar*, serves as a powerful socio-political commentary, a literary "witness" to the cultural and linguistic landscape of South Punjab during this time.

Neeli Bar masterfully captures the political misogyny that defined the era, particularly the ferocious opposition to Benazir Bhutto's leadership. Iqbal documents how religious clerics and extremist factions used religious rhetoric to frame female governance as an un-Islamic abomination, labelling Bhutto a '*Bebaak aurat*'—a "bold" or "brazen" woman, a term used as a derogatory slur (Iqbal 2022, 246). The novel records the fiery sermons that permeated the public sphere, such as one cleric's rhetorical attack: "Was a woman born a prophet? Ever lead a prayer? Have women ever stood at a funeral?... Women have only one high position: a mother in this world and a thing to entertain... in the hereafter" (Iqbal 2022, 273). I argue that this rhetoric, documented by Iqbal, was the cultural analogue to the Hudood Ordinances; both served to declare women unfit for public life and authority.

Beyond the political, *Neeli Bar* intimately documents the language of domestic abuse. Iqbal's narrative is filled with the verbal insults that form the daily soundtrack of subjugation. Phrases like '*kaali thagni*' (black/deceitful woman) and '*pheeni*' (insane) are not random; I argue they are specific linguistic tools of control (Iqbal 2022,

73). To call a woman "deceitful" is to justify monitoring her; to call her "insane" is to invalidate her complaints of abuse. This language functions as a form of "psychological colonization," dehumanizing women and normalizing the violence enacted upon them, making it seem righteous or deserved.

This literary portrait of oppression is echoed in Tehmina Durrani's 1999 novel *Blasphemy*. While Durrani's story is focused on the grotesque hypocrisy and abuse within the inner sanctum of a corrupt religious *pir* (saint), and *Neeli Bar* focuses on the broader feudal-patriarchal system, I suggest they are two sides of the same coin. Both novels paint a damning portrait of a society where powerful men—be they feudal lords or self-proclaimed saints—use a combination of religious authority, economic power, and the threat of violence to treat women as personal chattel, secure in the knowledge that the state and society will not intervene.

The qualitative interviews I conducted (Zain 2024) confirm that this literary depiction was, if anything, an understatement. The testimony from women who lived through this period reveals the precise mechanisms of control. The first, as detailed by interviewees Sadia Bibi and Ayesha Khan, was the rigid enforcement of cultural expectations. A woman's role was exclusively defined as that of a "primary caregiver," responsible for the home, children, and husband. To defy this role, even by seeking education or employment, was to invite social ostracization and be labelled "insane"—the very word (*pheeni*) used in Iqbal's novel.

This cultural expectation was enforced by the ideology of "family honour." Interviewees Rubina Javed and Suman Khokhar described

this concept as a "crushing burden placed exclusively on women." A woman's conduct, her dress, her speech, and her very visibility are constantly monitored, as any perceived transgression would bring "shame" upon the entire family (Zain 2024). This ideology, I argue, effectively turns every male relative into a potential jailer and makes the home a prison, reinforcing the *chardvari* (four walls) concept promoted by the state.

The "primary chain" that locked women into this prison, as described by interviewees Farida Bibi and Noreen Aslam, was total financial dependence. Lacking education and prohibited from working, women had no means of survival outside of their marriage. This economic vulnerability was, I argue, the single most powerful tool for ensuring submission. A woman could not leave an abusive husband because she, and her children, would face starvation. This dependence was compounded by a profound lack of legal awareness; most women had no idea that any legal recourse, however faint, even existed (Zain 2024).

Into this tinderbox of cultural expectation, family honour, and economic dependence, violence was the inevitable spark. The interviews reveal the daily, normalized reality of abuse. Fauzia Bibi described her husband as a drug addict who "frequently and almost always subjected me to abuse," forcing her to eventually seek a divorce. Sadia Bibi shared a traumatic story of her husband beating her for "bringing dishonor to the family" because her "household duties" were not performed to his liking (Zain 2024). These testimonies show how violence was used as a routine tool of "discipline" and control, legitimized by the patriarchal norms of the society.

The ultimate victory of this system, however, was the "enforced silence" of its victims. This was the most pervasive theme in the interviews. Women like Sahar Mahmood and Muneera Bibi described suffering years of abuse in total silence, terrified of social rejection and retaliation. "I didn't report it because I knew the society would blame me," Sahar Mahmood explained (Zain 2024). This fear was not irrational; it was a perfect understanding of their reality. They knew that their family would blame them, the community would ostracize them, and the legal system—which valued their testimony at half that of a man's and might charge them with *Zina*—would punish them.

The toll of this system was, and is, absolute. Interviewees Tariq Begum and Gulnaz Khokhar detailed the long-term consequences of this silent suffering. The physical toll included chronic pain and disabilities from repeated beatings. The psychological toll was even more profound, manifesting as deep anxiety, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Zain 2024). This, I argue, is the final, devastating legacy of the 1980-2000 period: a generation of women in South Punjab who are not only physically abused but psychologically shattered, trapped in a system of state-sanctioned terror from which there was no escape.

CONCLUSION

I have argued that the epidemic of domestic violence that ravaged South Punjab from 1980 to 2000 was neither accidental nor a simple relic of ancient cultural traditions. It was, instead, the logical and predictable outcome of a modern, state-driven project of social engineering. The Zia-ul-Haq regime, in its quest for political legitimacy,

deliberately built a legal cage for women. The Hudood Ordinances and the Qanun-e-Shahadat are the iron bars of this cage, meticulously designed to strip women of legal personhood, devalue their testimony, and criminalize their victimhood. This legal architecture provided divine and state sanction for the very patriarchal and feudal oppressions that already defined societies like South Punjab, effectively empowering abusers with the full backing of the law.

The subsequent "democratic decade" represented a profound betrayal of the hope it inspired. The political infighting between the PPP and PML-N, combined with the lingering power of the conservative establishment, resulted in a complete and catastrophic failure to dismantle this legal cage. This political stagnation, I have demonstrated, created an environment of total impunity, where the reported rates of domestic murder, acid attacks, and "stove burnings" climbed to horrific new heights. The state did not just fail to protect women; it actively perpetuated the legal framework that enabled their abuse. The violence was not a breakdown of the system; it was the system functioning as designed.

The testimonies of women from South Punjab, and the powerful literary witness of *Neeli Bar*, transform this analysis from a dry legal history into an undeniable human story. They articulate the precise mechanisms of control—the language of abuse, the burden of honour, the chains of economic dependence, and the terror of a legal system designed to punish the victim. These voices reveal the lived, daily reality of a war waged against women, not by a foreign enemy, but by their own state, their own communities, and their own families, behind the veil and within the four walls of the home. I suggest

that this 20-year period, far from being a closed chapter of history, created the deep, structural wounds and legal precedents that continue to haunt the struggle for women's rights in Pakistan today.

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