

Reducing Victim-Blaming Attitudes towards Rape Survivors in Punjab, Pakistan

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Legal reform has run ahead of public attitudes: reducing victim-blaming in Punjab now depends on sustained public education, survivor-centered institutions, and responsible media, not new legislation alone.

Executive Summary

How common are victim blaming attitudes towards rape survivors in Punjab, and what drives them? To answer this question, this brief combines a survey of 176 adults in Punjab through in-depth interviews with a senior provincial official, frontline human rights activist and an analysis of recent news coverage. These survey findings show that most of the respondents do not strongly blame survivors, a large number of respondents hold at least moderate victim blaming beliefs particularly around women's mobility, clothing, and alcohol, and men. Rural, and younger respondents blame survivors more. Awareness of the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, 2021 is low and public confidence in police and courts is very low. Exposing a wide gap between legal reform and everyday practices the headline recommendation is that the Government of Punjab should pair enforcement of the 2021 Act with sustained public-education campaigns, survivor-centered police and court reform, and responsible media standards, because it is entrenched attitudes and institutional distrust not the absence of law that keep survivors silent.

1. Introduction

Four years after Pakistan passed a landmark anti rape law and against a backdrop of repeated high profile cases in Punjab. It is a time to ask whether public attitudes towards rape survivors have actually changed or not. Sexual violence is a serious human rights and public health problem but its harm does not end with the assault. Many survivors experience secondary victimization in which family, community, media or officials blame or disbelieve them instead of holding perpetrators responsible (Burt, 1980). Victim-blaming means placing responsibility for an assault on the survivor for her clothing, behavior or choices rather than on the offender and it is closely linked to rape myth acceptance false beliefs that excuse or minimize sexual violence (Payne et al., 1999).

Researchers explain victim blaming through the Just World Hypothesis, the idea that people want to believe the world is fair and so assume victims must have done something to deserve their fate (Lerner, 1980). Attribution Theory adds that observers tend to blame a person's behavior rather than the situation while feminist scholars root victim blaming in patriarchal norms that policewomen's conduct (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Across studies, men report higher RMA than women, and survivors are blamed more when they knew the attacker had used alcohol, delayed reporting or appeared to break traditional gender roles (Persson & Dhingra, 2022; Dawtry et al., 2019).

In Pakistan, reports from the HRCP, War Against Rape, Sahil, and the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW) consistently identify stigmas like fear of shame, insensitive police responses, and slow courts as major barriers to justice. Punjab accounts for a large share of the country's reported rape cases yet reliable evidence on how the province's own public views survivors has remained thin. In 2021, Pakistan passed the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act, creating special courts, faster investigations, and stronger survivor protection. However, most existing work examines the law itself rather than whether public attitudes have shifted. In the Lahore motorway assault case of 2020, a senior police officer publicly questioned why the survivor had travelled alone at night, showing how deeply victim blaming runs within institutions. This brief helps fill that gap by measuring victim-blaming attitudes in Punjab directly.

International research links victim blaming closely to rape myth acceptance and to who the survivor is, for example whether alcohol was involved or the attacker was known (Table 1).

Table 1. What international research shows

Study	Context	Key finding
Payne et al. (1999)	USA	Men show higher rape myth acceptance than women.
Grubb & Turner (2012)	Research review	Rape myths strongly predict victim blaming.
Sleath & Bull (2017)	UK	Just-world beliefs increase blame of survivors.
Dawtry et al. (2019)	UK	People re-remember events to justify blaming victims.
Persson & Dhingra (2022)	International	More blame when alcohol or an acquaintance is involved.

Within South Asia ideas of family honor, women's mobility and traditional gender norms shape how survivors are judged and similar social pressures keep them from reporting (Table 2).

Table 2. Victim-blaming patterns across South Asia

Country	Common victim-blaming narrative	Main barrier to reporting
Pakistan	Family honor and stigma	Fear of shame
India	Focus on women's mobility	Social judgment
Bangladesh	Questions about female morality	Family pressure
Nepal	Traditional gender norms	Community stigma

2. Methodology

This study uses mixed-methods approach for research. Its main data source is an online survey of 176 adults in Punjab distributed through Google Forms which used a 20 items scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) measuring victim blaming and rape myth beliefs. Five pro-survivor items were reverse-scored, and all items were averaged into a single Victim Blaming (VB) Index on which higher scores indicate stronger blame. The survey also included three short, realistic scenarios and questions on legal awareness and institutional confidence and was analyzed using descriptive statistics and simple group comparisons. This was supported by two in-depth interviews with experienced practitioners (one senior official at the Punjab Women Development Department (WDD) and one human rights activist with two decades of frontline experience supporting survivors of sexual and gender-based violence) and by a review of recent Punjab rape coverage with each article coded on nine dimensions such as naming, tone and blame cues.

These methods carry a number of limitations. The survey is a convenience sample that leans urban, educated and female. So, these results describe this group rather than all of Punjab attitudes were self-reported and may understate socially disapproved views and the qualitative evidence rests on two expert interviews and a limited set of articles. The findings should therefore be read as an informative snapshot that highlights patterns worth studying further not as a representative estimate for the whole province.

3. Key Findings

Who was surveyed. Of the 176 respondents, about 65% were women and 34% men, 77% were urban and 23% rural and 58% held a Master's degree or higher. The sample therefore reflects a specific relatively urban socioeconomic segment and should not be considered representative of the broader population of Punjab. According to the latest survey almost 60% of Punjab's population lives in rural areas compared with only 23% of respondents in this survey. The findings should therefore be understood reflecting the attitudes of the selected sample rather than the Punjab population as a whole.

3.1 Outright blame is a minority view, but a large ambivalent middle is not

On the VB Index, the average score was 2.26 out of 5, so outright victim-blaming was not the most common position. The picture is more concerning, however, at the level of specific beliefs. About one in three respondents (31.8%) showed at least a moderate victim-blaming tendency, and 13.1% held a clear net victim-blaming position across the whole scale.

Agreement was highest for “situational” items that blame women's choices. Around one in five agreed that women who stay out late take unnecessary risks (21%), that travelling alone at night is dangerous (19%), that accepting alcohol implies shared responsibility (18%), or that visiting a man's home alone invites unwanted advances (18%). Major rape myths like women easily faking accusations (11%) or the idea that it isn't really rape without force (10%), drew less agreement but were still not rare (Figure 1).

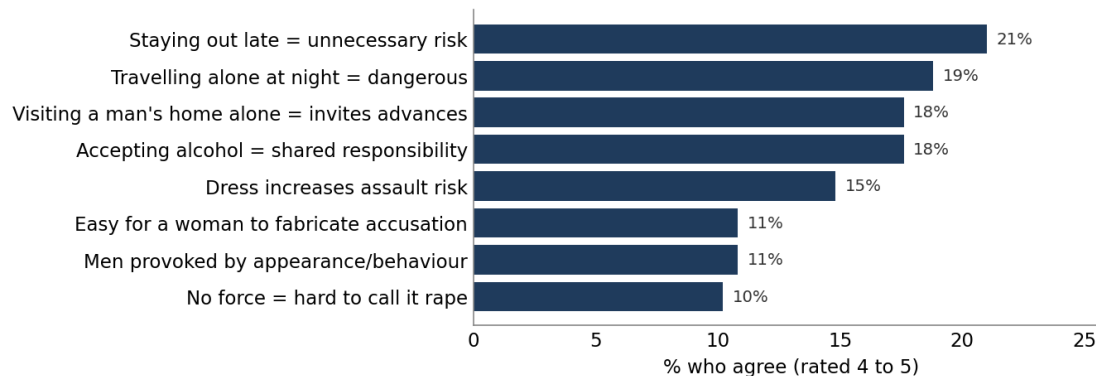


Figure 1. Agreement with victim-blaming statements (% who agree).

The scenarios showed the same conditional blame. When a woman had been drinking before an assault, 20% gave her moderate-to-high responsibility; in the motorway scenario, 11% agreed she should not have travelled alone at night, and another 30% gave a “middle” answer rather than disagreeing. Support for pro-survivor statements was also only moderate (31 to 44% clearly agreed). The evidence points to a large “ambivalent middle” that neither firmly rejects rape myths nor firmly supports survivors, and is the most important group to reach.

3.2 Men, rural, younger, and lower-middle-income respondents blame more

Group comparisons on the VB Index revealed several statistically significant patterns (Figure 2). Men scored higher than women (2.43 vs 2.17, $p = .013$) and rural respondents higher than urban ones (2.56 vs 2.18, $p = .002$). Younger adults aged 25 to 34 scored highest and those aged 55 and older lowest. While income mattered too, the lower middle income group scored highest and the highest-income group lowest ($p < .001$).

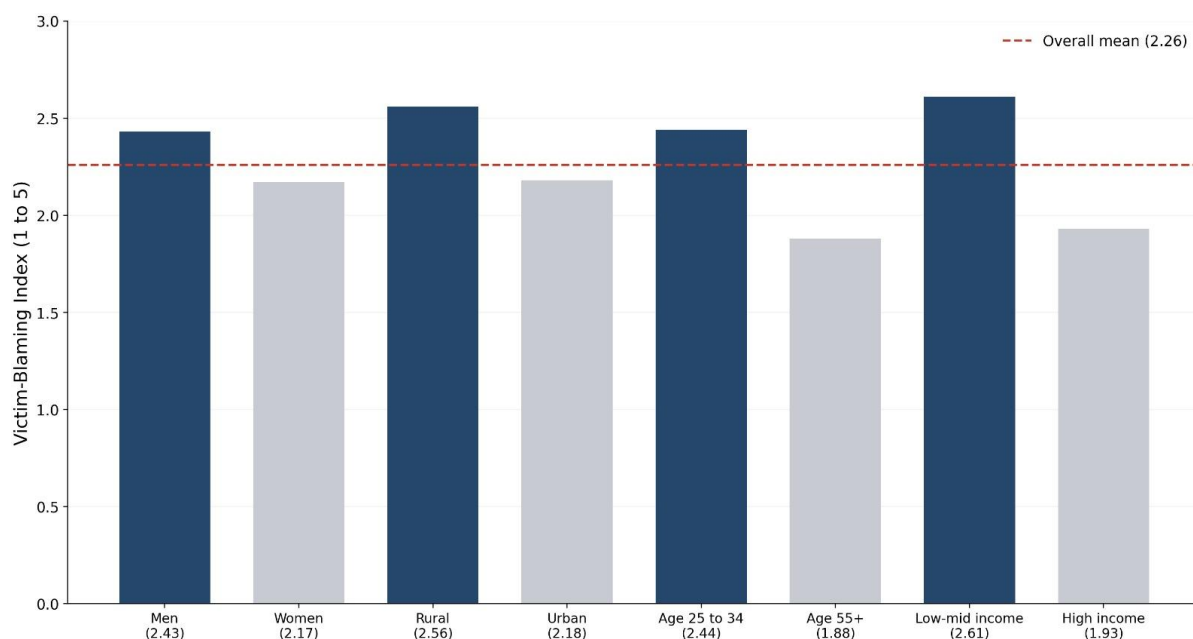


Figure 2. Average victim-blaming score by group (VB Index, 1 to 5). Higher = more blame.

Two “non-findings” are just as useful. Education level made no clear difference once broad categories were compared and strikingly people who had previously attended a gender or harassment training scored no lower than those who had not (2.25 vs 2.28) which proves that one-off awareness sessions as currently run may not be enough to change attitudes.

3.3 Awareness of the law is low and trust in institutions is very low

Awareness of the Anti-Rape Act, 2021 was low around 39% of respondents had never heard of it, and only about a quarter had heard of it and knew what it did. Nearly half (48%) felt that Pakistan’s current laws do not adequately protect survivors.

Confidence in the institutions that enforce the law was very low. More than eight in ten had little or no confidence that police would investigate rape fairly and about three in four doubted that courts would deliver justice. Fewer than one in six expressed high confidence in any institution and medical staff were trusted only slightly more than police or courts. Four years after the Act was passed, this points to a clear implementation gap that the law exists on paper, but the public has not seen a change in how concerned institutions treat survivors. Low trust is not neutral if survivors expect police to doubt them and courts to delay, not reporting becomes the rational choice, which keeps official case numbers low and reform pressure weak. A human rights activist interviewed for this brief illustrated the gap: although the laws exist, she said, the officials who apply them often carry “the same biased mentality,” and she recalled police refusing to collect a bedsheet a mother brought as evidence of her stepdaughter’s abuse, despite its forensic value.

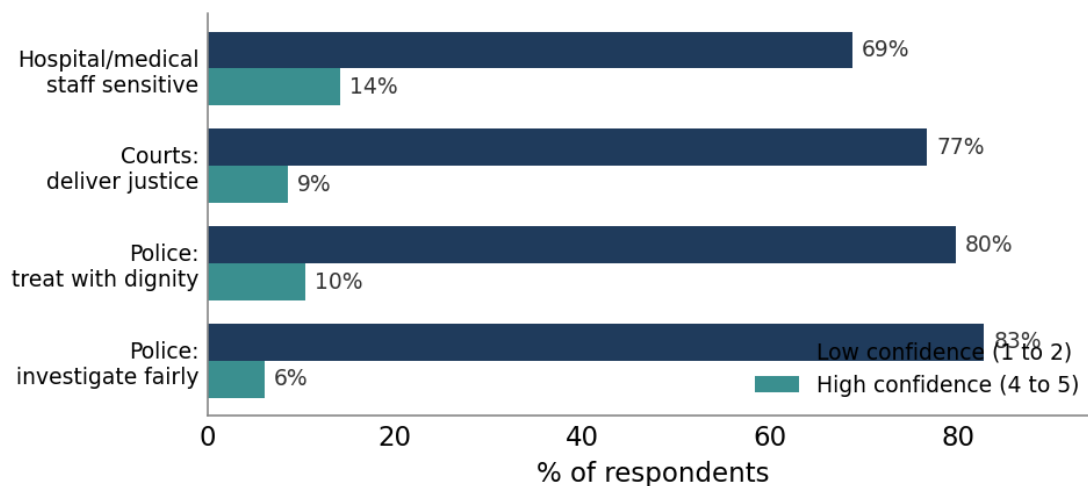


Figure 3. Confidence in institutions (% low vs high confidence).

3.4 Silence is driven by social norms and institutional distrust together

When asked why survivors do not report, respondents most often pointed to social and family pressure, fear of stigma and judgment (70%), fear of family rejection (61%) topped the list followed by negative police attitudes (53%), shame or self-blame (49%) and fear of the perpetrator (44%). Institutional problems namely police attitude, the long court process and fear of not being believed made up three of the top seven reasons showing that social norms and distrust of institutions drive silence at the same time. This echoes the same activist's observation that blame frequently begins with survivors themselves who may conclude "it is my fault" before family and community reinforce it.

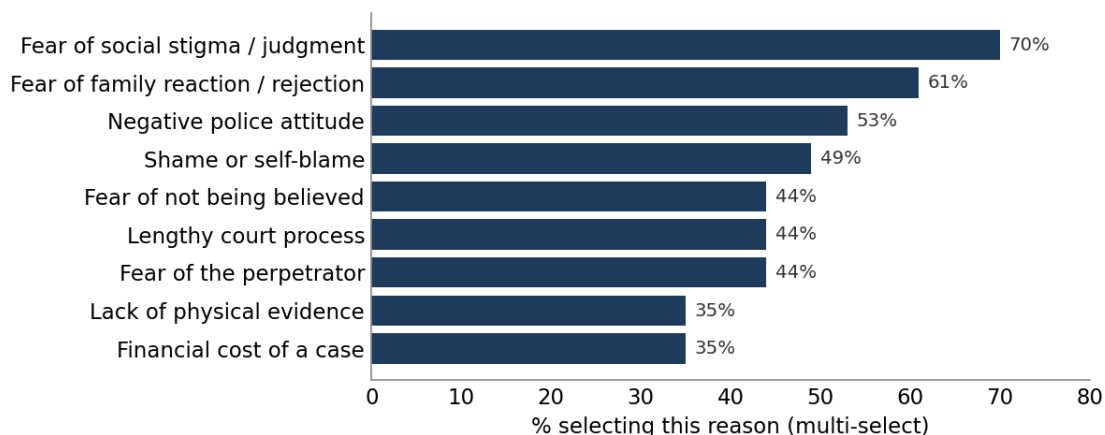


Figure 4. Why survivors do not report (% selecting each reason; multi-select).

3.5 What frontline experts see

The two interviews reinforced and deepened the survey results. A senior WDD official described victim blaming as normal saying that communities respond to assault by shaming survivors and telling women to take precautions like to stay in, or dress differently trying to change women instead of helping them. She linked this to culture, misogyny, patriarchy, lack of education and to the misuse of religion to justify blame. Consistent with the survey she noted that modern women are blamed more than traditional ones and that this blame lowers survivor's self-esteem and deters them from coming forward.

On services, she pointed to the WDD helpline 1043 but was candid that her department does not lead the gender-based violence agenda (that role sits with the Punjab Women Protection Authority) which itself signals coordination gaps. She saw the media as extremely influential and urged outlets to protect survivor anonymity and avoid insensitive language. Her practical suggestions included strict trial timelines, gender sensitivity training for police and judges,

better rural forensic facilities and proven service models such as all-female police stations, hospital-based One Stop Crisis Centers, a coordinated Sexual Assault Response Team (SART) protocol linking police, forensic nurses and advocates. Her closing point captured this brief's theme "Legislative reforms are only half the battle."

A human rights activist with two decades of frontline experience added further texture. She described blame as layered moving from the family (where a daughter may be blamed for her gender in the name of honor) to the wider community. While transgender survivors, she noted that they are blamed almost by default. She also stressed that class shapes how cases are handled, wealthier families frequently conceal cases to protect their reputation so most reported cases come from lower and middle-income households where honor is fiercely defended. She judged children the most vulnerable because a socialization that forbids questioning elders leaves them unable to separate respect from reporting and warned that online spaces are making child abuse more common.

3.6 Media coverage is uneven rather than uniformly hostile

Drawing on recent coverage in Dawn, Geo News and The Express Tribune (2023 to 2026), each article was coded on nine dimensions including naming, voice, terminology, blame cues and overall tone. Most routine cases were reported fairly neutrally; survivors were kept anonymous (often described by age or role, such as "13-year-old girl") and reports used passive procedural language. The word "alleged" appeared almost everywhere but as standard legal caution rather than doubt.

The clearest victim-blaming came in the Lahore college case where a state council and the Chief Minister publicly called the survivor's account fabricated, directly attacking her credibility at the highest level (The Express Tribune, 2024; Dawn, 2024). Coverage also revealed unequal attention, a case involving foreign women drew Chief Minister-level directives and detailed named coverage, while most local survivors received routine low-visibility reporting even when officially labelled high priority. Two opinion pieces stood apart by shifting blame away from survivors entirely framing rape as a systemic state-level failure. Overall Punjab's media is not uniformly victim-blaming but shows uneven urgency, credibility-questioning, and visibility depending on who the survivor is. A frontline activist was sharper still, criticizing outlets for ignoring ethical guidelines, exposing survivors' identities, and using sensational thumbnails to create hype.

4. Recommendations

Primary actor: Government of Punjab specifically the Punjab Commission on the Status of Women (PCSW), the Punjab Police, the Punjab Judicial Academy, the Punjab Women Protection Authority, the School and Higher Education Departments. Because attitudes and institutional distrust, not the absence of law, keep survivors silent. These actors should combine enforcement of the 2021 Act with the following specific feasible steps.

1. PCSW: run sustained public education campaigns, not one-off events. The PCSW with the Information Department should commission repeated province wide campaigns across television, radio and social media that place responsibility on perpetrators and publicize survivor's rights under the Anti-Rape Act. This directly answers the finding that a single past training was associated with no reduction in blame.

2. Punjab Police: mandate trauma informed training and pilot all female police stations. Given that over 80% of respondent's distrust police handling of rape the force should require gender sensitivity training for all frontline officers and pilot all female police stations in Lahore and two additional districts to reduce intimidation at first contact. Training should embed a principle stressed by frontline practitioners to believe survivors rather than interrogating them about their clothing, movements or delay in reporting.

3. Punjab Judicial Academy: enforce statutory trial timelines. Courts should apply and monitor the strict timelines set out in the 2021 Act to cut delays that re-traumatize survivors with quarterly reporting of average rape case duration.

4. Punjab Women Protection Authority: expand One Stop Crisis Centers and a SART-style referral protocol. The Authority should scale up hospital-based crisis centers that place medical care, counselling and reporting in one safe location linked by a documented referral protocol between the WDD, police and hospitals to close the coordination gaps identified in the interview.

5. Education Departments: embed consent and gender equality in curricula. School and university curricula should include age-appropriate content on consent, gender equality and respect targeting the deep-seated attitudes that awareness sessions alone did not shift. Given practitioner's warning that abuse is increasingly moving into online spaces and that children are taught not to question adults, this content should also cover child protection and digital safety.

6. Government of Punjab: track attitudes over time. The government should commission a repeated public attitude survey to measure whether victim blaming, legal awareness and institutional trust improve and use the results to guide funding.

5. Conclusion

Victim-blaming remains a real barrier to justice for rape survivors in Punjab. This brief has shown that while outright blame is a minority view, a large ambivalent middle holds conditional victim blaming beliefs awareness of the 2021 Anti-Rape Act is low, trust in police and courts is very low, a gap that survey data, two frontline interviews and media analysis all confirm. Until Punjab treats attitudes as seriously as it treats legislation, survivors will keep paying the price for crimes committed against them. Ending victim blaming means moving the burden of blame off survivors and onto the people who commit these crimes.

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