LET WOMEN BREATH: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON DEHUMANIZATION AND DECOLONIZATION OF WOMEN IN PAKISTAN AND AFRICA

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Abstract

Religion, culture, politics, and socio-economic inequalities continue to shape women's lived experiences in both Pakistan and Africa, often limiting opportunities for progressive development within historically male-dominated social systems. This exploratory study foregrounds women's voices and examines how postcolonial patriarchal structures restrict women's access to social, political, and economic spaces necessary for self-realization and collective advancement. Despite formal independence and legal reforms, many women across these regions remain constrained by inherited cultural norms, unequal gender roles, and power relations that privilege male authority. Women are frequently denied autonomy over fundamental life choices, including education, leadership, and marriage, and in extreme cases face violence for resisting expectations tied to honor, obedience, and sexual control. Such realities are not isolated cultural anomalies but reflections of broader structural inequalities sustained by economic dependency, political exclusion, and selective interpretations of tradition and religion. Within these contexts, women experience a condition of social breathlessness marked by silence, fear, and limited agency, yet also by resilience and resistance. By examining Pakistan and Africa comparatively, this study humanizes women's struggles while exposing the shared mechanisms of dehumanization and highlighting decolonization as a necessary pathway toward dignity, justice, and gender equity.

Keywords: *Let Women Breathe, Women Dehumanization, Women Decolonization; Women's Studies; Postcolonial Feminism; Gender Inequality*

INTRODUCTION

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship has increasingly sought to understand how women's everyday lives are shaped by long-standing social inequalities and ongoing efforts to challenge them. Within this work, dehumanization is commonly used to describe situations in which women's voices, choices, and lived experiences are minimized or overlooked through social norms and institutional practices that make inequality appear normal or unremarkable. Decolonization is often discussed as a continuing process rather than a completed historical moment, referring to attempts to question inherited systems of power and knowledge that continue to influence how gender roles and social

authority are understood. Recent feminist writing emphasizes that these processes must be examined through women's own experiences and local histories, recognizing both shared challenges and diverse forms of agency across different societies (Kamlongera, 2025; Rhule et al., 2025).

In Pakistan, a growing body of literature explores how women's lives are shaped by the interaction of historical legacies, legal structures, religious interpretations, and everyday social expectations. These influences affect women's participation in education, work, and public life, as well as their roles within families and communities. At the same time, recent studies highlight how Pakistani women actively engage with and respond to these conditions in varied ways, including through education, civic participation, cultural expression, and advocacy. Such work presents women not only as affected by structural constraints but also as individuals who negotiate meaning, belonging, and autonomy within their social worlds, framing decolonization as an ongoing and uneven process (Alia & Umer, 2025; Zia, 2018).

Across African contexts, research similarly points to the lasting impact of colonial histories and social hierarchies on women's access to resources, recognition, and decision-making spaces. Studies note that colonial rule reshaped many indigenous social systems, with effects that continue to influence gender relations in contemporary political and economic institutions. At the same time, African feminist and gender scholarship places strong emphasis on women's everyday contributions to family life, community organization, and social change. Through locally grounded forms of knowledge, collective action, and cultural renewal, African women continue to redefine social roles and assert their presence in ways that reflect lived practices of dignity and self-determination, highlighting decolonization as a process rooted in daily life rather than abstract theory (Kamlongera, 2025; Musingafi, 2023).

Women in Leadership: Pakistan and Africa

Women in Pakistan continue to face significant challenges in entering and exercising leadership in politics. Although constitutional provisions and reserved seats in legislative assemblies have increased the number of women in formal political structures, the country remains dominated by men who hold the majority of elected offices and party leadership positions. Scholars argue that cultural norms, patriarchal family expectations, and limited access to financial and social resources prevent many women from pursuing political careers or from being taken seriously as candidates (Ullah, 2025; Akram, 2025). Political parties often prioritize male candidates for general elections, while women on reserved seats frequently struggle to influence decision-making in meaningful ways. These barriers reveal that political representation alone does not guarantee real empowerment or agency for women in Pakistan.

Despite these challenges, Pakistani women have shown remarkable resilience and determination. They continue to engage in politics through activism, local governance, and community

advocacy. Research highlights how women leaders often focus on issues that directly affect their communities, including education, healthcare, and social welfare, demonstrating the practical impact of women's participation beyond mere symbolic presence (Batool, 2025; Kainaat et al., 2025). Women in politics navigate societal expectations while asserting their agency, negotiating spaces within male-dominated structures, and striving to influence policy and decision-making. Scholars emphasize that the journey toward meaningful leadership for women in Pakistan is a gradual, lived process, rooted in persistence, strategy, and courage (Akram, 2025; Ullah, 2025).

Across African contexts, women's political leadership faces both historical and contemporary challenges, shaped in part by colonial legacies that disrupted indigenous governance systems and reinforced patriarchal hierarchies. Scholars note that colonial administrations often marginalized women from decision-making roles, and these structural inequities continue to affect access to political power and social resources (Kamlongera, 2025; Musingafi, 2023). In many African countries, cultural norms and socio-economic constraints limit women's ability to participate in elections or hold office, particularly in rural areas where traditional authority structures remain influential. Despite these barriers, African women leaders have played vital roles in advocating for social change, mobilizing communities, and introducing policies that address education, health, and gender equality. Research shows that women often bring different perspectives and priorities to governance, challenging entrenched power dynamics and promoting more inclusive decision-making (Kamlongera, 2025; Musingafi, 2023).

African women's leadership is also marked by innovative strategies for navigating political spaces that were historically exclusionary. Many women combine formal political participation with grassroots activism, community organizing, and cultural advocacy to strengthen their influence and impact. Scholars emphasize that African women are actively engaged in shaping policies and social norms, reclaiming agency in both local and national arenas, and redefining what leadership looks like in postcolonial contexts (Rhule et al., 2025). These processes of empowerment demonstrate that meaningful political participation emerges not only from legal or institutional reform but also from everyday acts of negotiation, resistance, and collective action. By examining women's leadership in both Pakistan and African countries, it becomes evident that despite diverse contexts, women share the challenge of overcoming structural and cultural barriers while contributing uniquely to governance and social development.

Purdah, Clothing, and the Female Mental Cage: Pakistan and Africa

In many South Asian societies, dominant religions and cultural traditions, including Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, emphasize modest attire for women as a marker of dignity, respect, and social propriety. Traditional clothing varies across regions: in Pakistan, women commonly wear shalwar kameez, while in India saris are prevalent; in Korea, hanbok or chosŏn-ot are traditional garments, and in Myanmar, women wear thummy. These garments in themselves are culturally meaningful, yet problems arise when their use becomes enforced in ways that limit women's autonomy. Men are often free to adopt alternative or Western clothing, while women

are expected to strictly adhere to traditional norms. In Pakistan, women's dress and movement are frequently regulated by male family members, sometimes even by minors in the household, under the pretext of ensuring safety or maintaining modesty. From a critical perspective, such control can transform traditional practices, such as purdah, from instruments of cultural identity or moral education into tools of confinement and psychological restriction. Scholars argue that when enforced as a mechanism of control, purdah can become a cage that restricts mobility, limits self-expression, undermines self-esteem, and functions as a subtle form of social discipline (Papanek, 2021).

Purdah, when institutionalized as a disciplinary mechanism, limits women's exposure to social interactions beyond the family, thereby restricting opportunities for personal and professional development. In societies where marriage remains the principal path to social recognition for women, deviations from culturally prescribed behavior, including courtship or self-expression, are often met with suspicion or censure. Islamic and cultural betrothal laws in Pakistan reinforce this, granting husbands significant control over women's lives once married. Women's education, career, political engagement, and social interactions are frequently subject to male authority, while they must also navigate complex intra-family hierarchies. As Habiba (2017) observes, newly married women are often perceived as intruders into existing family territories, facing resistance from mothers-in-law and other female relatives who see the husband as part of their established household structure. Conflicts over control of resources, time, and emotional attention are common, creating a mental and social environment in which women must carefully negotiate their space and autonomy. Over time, some women assert themselves and establish their own spheres of influence, but these processes often mirror the same strategies of social control they initially faced, perpetuating cycles of domestic hierarchy and surveillance (Habiba, 2017).

A comparative perspective from Africa shows similar patterns of gendered social control linked to clothing, mobility, and marital hierarchies, although the specifics vary by region and cultural context. In Northern Nigeria, for example, purdah practices among certain Muslim communities limit women's physical mobility and participation in public life, while reinforcing family and communal expectations of modesty and obedience (Mama, 2019). In East African pastoralist communities, women's dress is both symbolic and regulatory, signaling marital and social status while marking boundaries of acceptable behavior within the community (Tamale, 2020). Across these African contexts, clothing and social norms are not merely about modesty or cultural identity but also function as tools of social governance, shaping women's psychological and social worlds. Similar to Pakistan, the enforcement of these norms often constrains women's autonomy, limits engagement with wider social networks, and positions them in hierarchies within families and communities. Despite these constraints, African women have historically found ways to negotiate these norms, exercising agency through adaptation, coalition-building, and community leadership, demonstrating that women's mental and social spaces are contested rather than fixed (Kamlongera, 2025; Tamale, 2020).

By examining both South Asian and African contexts, it becomes clear that traditional dress and purdah can function simultaneously as cultural expression and as a mechanism of social control. When clothing norms are enforced to restrict mobility, autonomy, or social interaction, they can contribute to a mental and social "cage" that shapes women's experiences, aspirations, and identities. Understanding these dynamics highlights the importance of analyzing cultural practices in terms of both their symbolic significance and their real-world implications for women's empowerment, agency, and mental well-being.

Unfavorable Socio-Cultural Patterns: Pakistan and Africa

Islamic scripture affirms the equal creation and intrinsic dignity of women and men, emphasizing mutual cooperation, care, and respect (Quran 3:195; Quran 9:71; Quran 33:35). However, in many social contexts these teachings are overshadowed by entrenched socio-cultural patterns that shape gender relations in ways that disadvantage women across multiple domains of life. In Pakistan, cultural norms intertwined with patriarchal family structures and socio-economic conditions contribute to poor mental health outcomes among women, particularly when domestic violence and constrained autonomy are present. Empirical research demonstrates a strong link between domestic abuse and adverse mental health outcomes among Pakistani women: married women who experience domestic violence report significantly higher levels of depression, anxiety, and reduced quality of life compared with those who are not abused, highlighting the psychological toll of gendered power inequalities within households (Malik et al., 2021). Other studies from rural Pakistan indicate that household dynamics, including non-cordial relations with in-laws and economic abuse, are associated with high rates of anxiety and depression, with limited access to professional mental health support due to stigma and cultural barriers (Parveen et al., 2025). These findings suggest that socio-cultural expectations around obedience, restricted mobility, and limited decision-making autonomy for married women contribute to chronic stress and psychological distress.

Socio-cultural pressures on women are not unique to South Asia. In sub-Saharan Africa, a substantial body of research shows that gender-based violence (GBV) and patriarchal norms are associated with poor mental health outcomes for women. A systematic review and meta-analysis of studies across sub-Saharan Africa found that women exposed to sexual violence were more than twice as likely to experience depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and emotional distress compared with women who had not experienced such violence (Woldie et al., 2024). Research from Zimbabwe demonstrates that intimate partner violence, food insecurity, and socio-economic disadvantage are strongly associated with depressive symptoms among women, reinforcing the mental health burden of entrenched gender inequalities (Machisa & Shamu, 2022). In Mozambique, intimate partner violence has been linked to increased rates of depression and anxiety among ever-married women, underscoring how controlling behaviours and violent interactions within intimate relationships contribute to psychological suffering (Muchemwa et al., 2025). Qualitative research from South Africa further reveals that women

subjected to gender-based violence experience depression, social isolation, and worthlessness, reflecting broader psychosocial effects that extend beyond physical harm (Rikhotso et al., 2025).

Both Pakistani and African studies illustrate that socio-cultural norms that privilege male authority and constrain women's autonomy are associated with adverse mental health outcomes. Whether through restricted mobility, pressure to conform to patriarchal family hierarchies, or exposure to intimate partner violence, women's psychological wellbeing is shaped by gendered social structures that often operate silently within families and communities. Addressing these patterns requires not only legal and institutional reforms but also culturally sensitive interventions that recognize the interplay between gender norms, family dynamics, and mental health.

Imbalanced Roles: Pakistan and Africa

In Pakistan, socio-cultural norms have historically confined women to domestic roles, often limiting their participation to household management while men take on the public role of breadwinner. Studies indicate that a majority of women remain in unpaid domestic work, with limited opportunities to contribute economically outside the home (Khan & Naz, 2018). This division of labor not only restricts women's personal development but also limits the broader economic potential of the nation, as women's labor and skills remain largely untapped. Research has also shown that women who pursue education or professional aspirations often face resistance from male family members who perceive female autonomy or ambition as a threat to traditional gender hierarchies (Rehman & Iqbal, 2020). Even highly educated women may find themselves in lower status positions or remunerated below their qualifications, illustrating how socio-cultural expectations intersect with structural barriers to reinforce gendered economic inequalities (Qureshi & Mahmood, 2022).

The perception of women's roles in Pakistan is closely tied to domesticity, motherhood, and obedience, with a premium placed on hospitality and family caretaking. Studies have observed that women who fulfill these roles are often socially valued, whereas women who pursue education or professional work may face tension or conflict within the household (Sara et al., 2015). The disparities between women of low and high socio-economic status further complicate this dynamic. In Karachi, research shows that younger women from low socio-economic backgrounds are predominantly housewives, while those from higher status groups have a higher likelihood of combining household responsibilities with professional work, though still facing societal constraints on autonomy and decision-making (Zainab, 2012).

Comparable patterns emerge in African contexts, where women's roles are similarly shaped by socio-cultural expectations and economic constraints. In many sub-Saharan African countries, women spend far more time on domestic responsibilities including childcare, cooking, and

household management while men engage primarily in income-generating work (Funk & Kabira, 2020). These roles often limit women's access to formal employment, higher education, and leadership positions. Research in Kenya and Tanzania demonstrates that women's economic and social participation is constrained by household expectations, community norms, and early family responsibilities, which are often imposed at a young age (Muthuri, 2021). Women in African settings, like their counterparts in Pakistan, may navigate conflicts between personal ambitions and familial obligations, experiencing social and psychological stress as they attempt to balance these pressures.

Across both regions, the imbalanced allocation of roles is reinforced through socialization, familial hierarchies, and community expectations. Women's labor, both domestic and economic, is often undervalued, and their contributions to family and society remain constrained by patriarchal norms. These imbalances shape women's life trajectories, limit economic independence, and have implications for mental and social wellbeing. Studies further indicate that restrictive gender norms in both Pakistan and Africa contribute to psychological strain, stress, and lower self-esteem, particularly when women are unable to engage meaningfully in education or economic activity despite their capabilities (Jabeen & Alvi, 2020; Osei-Tutu & Agyemang, 2022).

Forced Marriage

Forced marriage is a global phenomenon that restricts individual autonomy, disproportionately affecting women and girls. Across diverse societies, cultural norms, economic pressures, and family expectations intersect to coerce young women into unions without their consent. Such practices undermine personal agency, limit educational and economic opportunities, and have lasting psychological consequences, including stress, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem (UNICEF, 2022; Ssewanyana, 2020). Forced marriage often arises from deeply entrenched patriarchal structures, where women's social value is tied to marital alliances rather than individual choice.

In Pakistan, forced marriage is particularly prevalent in rural and indigenous communities, where cultural norms emphasize family alliances, social reputation, and intergenerational obligations. Girls in these settings are frequently married without their consent, often as part of customary practices such as ghag. While some families frame arranged marriages as protective or socially prudent, coercion removes the woman's autonomy and exposes her to significant psychological and social stress (Noreen, 2013; Khan & Ali, 2020). Women with greater exposure to education or urban life often resist such arrangements, highlighting the conflict between traditional practices and modern expectations of personal agency (George, 2017).

Legally, Pakistan recognizes women's right to freely consent to marriage. The Elimination of Custom of Ghag Act of 2013 explicitly prohibits coercive marriage practices, establishing

consent as a prerequisite for a valid union (Noreen, 2013). Despite such legislation, ghag persists in communities across Punjab, Sindh, and urban centers such as Karachi and Lahore. These coercive practices often involve public declarations, mobilization of male relatives, and community pressure, leaving women with minimal choice. The long-term effects include reduced self-esteem, social marginalization, and diminished control over life decisions (Okoth, 2021).

Forced and child marriages are widespread practices in many societies, often justified through cultural norms, family honor, and economic considerations, yet they severely limit the autonomy, rights, and life opportunities of girls. In Pakistan, these practices are embedded in traditional communities where parents and elders often determine the future marital partners of their daughters without their consent. While marriage is generally regarded as a unifying and honorable social institution, girls coerced into unions frequently experience restricted access to education, social isolation, and psychological distress (Noreen, 2013; George, 2017). In some regions, customary practices such as *ghag* involve the forcible marriage of girls under the pressure of community expectations, sometimes accompanied by threats or coercion, demonstrating how patriarchal structures maintain control over women's personal choices. These marriages can have long-term implications, including early childbearing, health complications, limited career prospects, and heightened vulnerability to domestic violence, leaving many young women caught between societal obedience and personal aspirations. The persistence of these practices, despite legal prohibitions such as the Elimination of Custom of Ghag Act (2013), reflects the deep entrenchment of male authority and social norms that normalize female subordination and diminish the recognition of women as autonomous agents in Pakistani society (Noreen, 2013; George, 2017).

Similar patterns are observed across parts of Africa, particularly in East and West Africa, where child and forced marriages remain common despite legal reforms and international advocacy efforts. In countries such as Ethiopia, Uganda, and Nigeria, girls are often married at a young age due to a combination of family expectations, socio-economic pressures, and deeply entrenched social and cultural norms. Families may view marriage as a way to secure alliances, protect family honor, or reduce financial burdens, often disregarding the girls' consent and personal ambitions (UNICEF, 2022; Ssewanyana, 2020). Girls in these contexts experience disrupted education, limited economic opportunities, and increased exposure to gender-based violence, while simultaneously facing mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Kidman & Palermo, 2016; Walker et al., 2020). The tension between personal ambitions and societal expectations is acute, as girls attempt to negotiate the pursuit of education and autonomy within systems that prioritize traditional gender roles. Forced marriage in Africa reflects the intersection of patriarchal authority, economic vulnerability, and cultural norms that systematically restrict female agency and perpetuate structural inequalities. These patterns, much like those in South Asia, demonstrate that the challenge of reconciling cultural traditions with women's rights is a global concern requiring sustained attention and research (UNICEF, 2022; Nour, 2009).

Across both Pakistan and Africa, forced and child marriage reflects the complex intersection of gender, culture, and power, where deeply entrenched patriarchal norms shape social expectations and limit women's autonomy. Despite the presence of legal frameworks, international conventions, and advocacy campaigns aimed at curbing these practices, cultural traditions and community pressures often override formal protections, leaving girls and young women vulnerable to coercion and exploitation (UNICEF, 2022; Ssewanyana, 2020). These marriages not only constrain educational and professional opportunities but also increase exposure to domestic violence, early childbearing, and adverse mental health outcomes, including anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Kidman & Palermo, 2016; Walker et al., 2020). The persistence of forced marriage highlights the ways in which patriarchal authority intersects with socio-economic pressures, family honor, and communal norms, effectively sustaining structural inequality across generations. Understanding these dynamics is critical not only for informing policy interventions and legal enforcement but also for fostering community engagement, raising awareness, and supporting initiatives that enhance women's agency, human rights, and overall well-being. Comparative studies across South Asia and Africa reveal that efforts to promote gender equality must engage with both cultural contexts and local power structures to create meaningful change, demonstrating that protecting individual rights requires coordinated action at the legal, social, and community levels

Crimes of Honor Killing

Honor killings, defined as the socially sanctioned murder of a woman perceived to have brought dishonor to her family or community, remain a persistent form of gender-based violence in South Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa. In Pakistan, honor killings are deeply rooted in patriarchal norms and cultural traditions that equate a family's reputation with the behavior of its female members (Ali, Asad, & Channa, 2019; Ahmed, Rehman, & Ammar, 2024). Studies consistently show that women who defy community norms, whether by choosing their own partner, engaging in premarital relationships, or asserting independence in social and educational spheres, are at heightened risk of being targeted. Research conducted in urban and rural settings across Pakistan finds that victims of honor killing are overwhelmingly female, with women often killed by close relatives in so-called restoration of family honor (Hadri, 2025; Qureshi, 2019). Despite legal reforms such as the Criminal Laws Amendment Act of 2016, which strengthened anti-honor killing provisions, enforcement remains inconsistent, particularly where informal justice systems like jirgas and tribal councils operate alongside or outside official judicial mechanisms (Ahmed, Rehman, & Ammar, 2024; Qureshi, 2019). Cultural narratives that position women's sexuality and marital choices as central to family reputation continue to sustain these practices, reinforcing social control over women's bodies and decisions.

In rural Pakistan, the intersection of tribal authority, limited educational access, and entrenched gender hierarchies increases women's vulnerability to honor-based violence. Qualitative studies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reveal that honor killings are justified through local interpretations of

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morality, jealousy, and power control, with community members often defending the practice as necessary to preserve social order (Habiba, Rauf, & Kainat, 2025). Women subjected to these norms experience not only physical violence but also profound psychological trauma, social isolation, and loss of educational and economic opportunities, perpetuating cycles of gendered inequality. The social control exerted through honor-based norms extends beyond isolated incidents of violence, restricting mobility, decision-making power, and long-term wellbeing for women across generations.

Comparable patterns are observed in parts of Africa, particularly in regions where customary and religious norms similarly grant men authority over women's marital and sexual decisions, and where honor-based violence manifests in harmful practices such as early and forced marriage. In countries such as Nigeria, Sudan, and Somalia, honor-related violence continues to be reported, with girls and young women frequently subjected to coercive marital arrangements that disregard their consent and autonomy (UNICEF, 2021; Le Roux & Biegon, 2020). These practices disproportionately affect young women by curtailing access to education and economic participation, reinforcing dependency, and increasing exposure to domestic abuse (Kidman & Palermo, 2016). Anthropological and sociological research from African contexts demonstrates that the ideology of honor functions as a mechanism of patriarchal control that regulates female behavior, often justified by selective interpretations of culture or religion, while legal protections are undermined by weak enforcement and community resistance (Le Roux & Biegon, 2020; Mensch, Bruce, & Greene, 2005). The persistence of honor-based violence in both South Asia and Africa reveals the broader interplay of gender, culture, and power, showing that protective legal frameworks alone are insufficient without societal transformation, community engagement, and reinforcement of women's agency and rights.

Sexual Dictatorship

In Islam, marriage is considered a sacred union, deserving the respect, care, and legal protection that the institution commands. It is meant to foster mutual love, companionship, and an environment where couples can express themselves freely. Sexual relations within marriage are intended to be acts of love, acceptance, and reciprocity, with both spouses participating in a consensual and caring manner. However, in Pakistan, socio-cultural constraints often distort this ideal. Studies indicate that married women frequently experience sexual relations as routine acts primarily satisfying the husband's needs, while their own sexual agency is largely ignored (Baig, 2016; Namaila, 2017). Polygynous arrangements exacerbate this inequality, as men may prioritize time and attention toward preferred wives, leaving others sexually unsatisfied. Cultural and religious norms reinforce obedience, while transgressions, particularly acts of perceived infidelity by women, may provoke severe social and legal consequences, including divorce or punitive measures (Baig, 2016; Namaila, 2017).

Comparable patterns are observed across sub-Saharan Africa, where patriarchal norms severely constrain women's sexual autonomy within marriage. In many communities, male authority over sexual and reproductive decisions remains entrenched, limiting women's ability to negotiate consent or safe sexual practices (Ibrahim et al., 2022). Evidence from Nigeria, Sudan, and other African nations demonstrates that women who attempt to assert sexual autonomy may face social sanctions, domestic violence, or marital instability (Abdullah et al., 2022; Musa et al., 2025). Polygynous unions are particularly associated with reduced sexual satisfaction and greater tolerance of intimate partner violence among women, highlighting structural inequalities that reinforce male control over marital intimacy (Musa et al., 2025). Women's educational attainment, economic independence, and urban residence are positively correlated with sexual agency, while rural residence and adherence to traditional male-dominated norms predict diminished autonomy (Abdullah et al., 2022; Ibrahim et al., 2022). These findings illustrate that sexual dictatorship in marriage is sustained not only by cultural and religious expectations but also by structural factors that limit women's mobility, decision-making, and personal agency.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of women's experiences in Pakistan and parts of Africa reveals the deep entrenchment of patriarchal, cultural, and colonial legacies that continue to limit female autonomy, dignity, and agency. Across these regions, women are subjected to forced marriages, honor-based violence, sexual subjugation, restricted access to education, and economic marginalization. These systemic inequities are not isolated incidents but part of a broader social architecture designed to uphold male authority and control over women's lives. The dehumanization of women is perpetuated through legal loopholes, customary norms, and social expectations that normalize obedience, silence, and submission as feminine virtues. At the same time, women in both contexts demonstrate resilience, resourcefulness, and agency within constrained environments, signaling the potential for transformative change if societal structures are reoriented to recognize and protect their rights. Understanding the historical, religious, and socio-cultural underpinnings of these forms of oppression is crucial for decolonizing gender relations, dismantling patriarchal norms, and enabling women to reclaim their rightful space as autonomous, valued, and equal participants in all spheres of society. True liberation involves not only legal protection but also a radical shift in societal mindset, one that affirms women's humanity, capacity, and right to self-determination without fear of reprisal or marginalization.

Addressing the dehumanization of women requires a multi-layered approach that combines legal reform, social advocacy, education, and economic empowerment. Governments should strengthen the enforcement of existing laws protecting women against forced marriage, honor-based violence, sexual coercion, and discriminatory practices, while ensuring that customary and tribal authorities comply with statutory provisions. Education campaigns targeting communities, men, and youth can challenge harmful gender norms and promote awareness of women's rights as human rights. Economic initiatives that provide women with skills training, employment opportunities, and financial independence will reduce dependency and vulnerability to coercive practices. Civil

society organizations, religious leaders, and international bodies should collaborate to monitor and report violations while supporting victims and survivors. Finally, fostering platforms for women's voices in governance, policy-making, and community decision-making is essential to ensure that interventions are grounded in lived realities and empower women as agents of change. Only through an integrated, intersectional strategy that combines legal, social, and cultural reform can societies in Pakistan, Africa, and beyond create environments where women can breathe freely, exercise their agency, and participate fully in shaping their futures.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Ghag: Is a traditional custom whereby a man aggressively lays conditions for marriage to a girl without their consent.

Purdah: It's a system whereby the female are made to observe strict standards of discipline that may necessitate seclusion.

Honor killing: Orchestrated killing of women who adamantly turns down organized marriages for the men of choice.

Dowry death: Death or killing of married women who experience continuous scenes of harassment and torture from their husbands.

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