

## ADVOCACY BRIEF:

### THE ROLE & EFFECTIVENESS OF HELPLINES IN COMBATING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is pervasive global issues, cutting across cultural and social boundaries. In Pakistan, GBV persists amidst a conservative societal stance on family issues, often concealed as private matters. The cultural notion of family privacy impedes intervention, leaving many women to silently endure violence, viewing it as fate rather than a reportable crime. According to the Global Gender Parity Index Report 2022, Pakistan ranks 145/146 for economic participation and opportunity, 135/156 for educational attainment, 145/156 for health and survival, 95/156 for political empowerment.<sup>1</sup> Pakistan has been ranked as the second-worst country in terms of gender parity, placed 145 out of 146 states, in the Global Gender Gap Report released by the World Economic Forum.<sup>2</sup> The Aurat Foundation's Annual Report on VAWG over 11,000 cases of GBV, with domestic violence (4,775), rape and gang rape (2,297), and murder (1,033) being most common.<sup>3</sup> The Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS) maintained that more than 1 in 4 ever-married women (28%) have experienced physical violence since age 15, and 6% have experienced sexual violence.<sup>4</sup>

According to a study conducted by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) titled "Factsheet on Domestic Violence During COVID-19 Lockdown", in 2020, 90% of Pakistani women have experienced some form of domestic violence in their lifetimes. The study also found that violence against women had increased during the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, access to crucial information and support was severely restricted due to lockdown measures and overwhelmed healthcare systems, exacerbating vulnerabilities for many individuals, particularly those facing domestic violence, mental health issues, or in need of emergency assistance. Helplines emerged as a vital bridge, offering remote access to essential services, guidance, and emotional support. Serving as a guiding toll amidst isolation, helplines played an integral role in the emergency response, providing a lifeline for those in distress. Their round-the-clock availability and confidential nature enabled individuals to seek assistance safely, overcoming barriers imposed by physical distancing measures. Helplines not only addressed immediate needs but also served as a cornerstone for resilience-building and community support during unprecedented times, highlighting their indispensable role in emergency preparedness and response efforts.

### GBV HELPLINES IN SINDH

In Sindh, Pakistan, several helplines have been established by various stakeholders including the government departments, law enforcement authorities and civil society organizations, to support survivors of GBV. These helplines play an important role in providing assistance, guidance, and support to individuals, mostly women and children, who are the victims of violence, abuse or exploitation.

Sr. No.	Helpline	Department/Organization
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<sup>1</sup>UN Women Pakistan. Accessed from <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/countries/pakistan>

<sup>2</sup> Pakistan second-worst country on Global Gender Gap Index: WEF report (2022). Daily Dawn. Accessed from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1699399>

<sup>3</sup> Violence against Women & Girls in the Times of Covid-19 Pandemic. A Rapid Analysis. Aurat Foundation. Accessed from <https://www.af.org.pk/PDF/VAWG%20Reports%20AND%20PR/VAWG%20Report%202020.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Pakistan DHS- Data Dissemination Event (2019). Accessed from <https://pakistan.unfpa.org/en/news/pakistan-dhs-data-dissemination-event#:~:text=According%20to%20PDHS%2C%20more%20than,have%20experienced%20violence%20during%20pregnancy.>

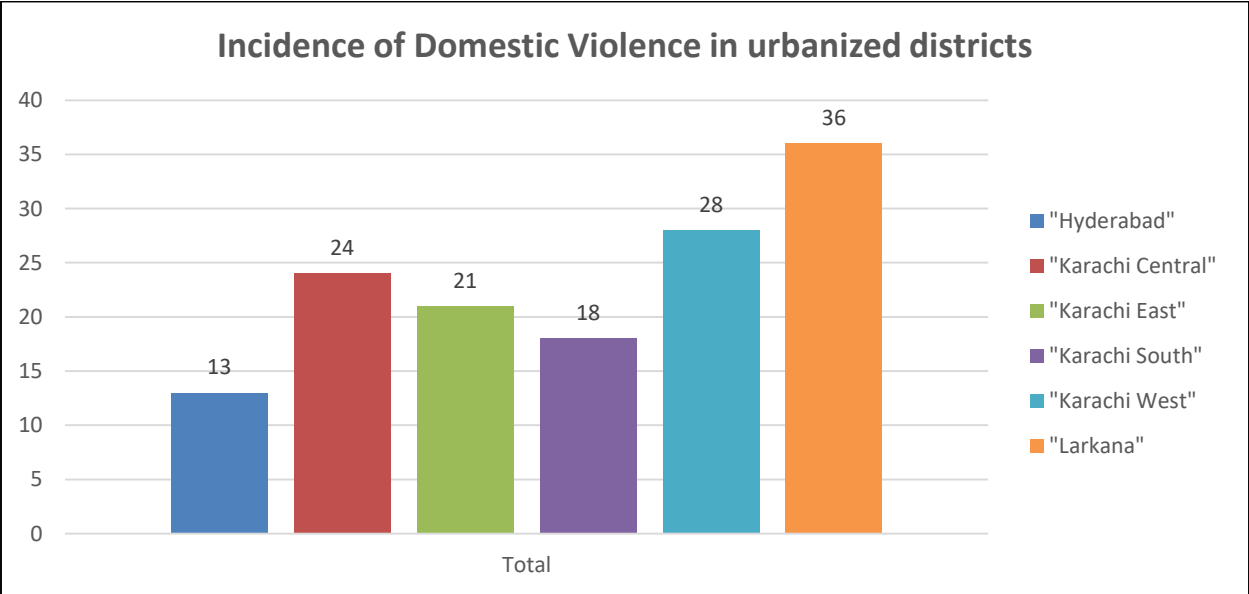
<sup>5</sup> Domestic Violence Policy Brief. National Commission for Human Rights, Pakistan. (2023) Accessed from <https://www.nchr.gov.pk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Domestic-Violence-Policy-Brief.pdf>

1.	1094	Women Development Department (WDD) active in 11 districts of Sindh
2.	0800-70806	Law Department, Sindh & Legal Aid Society (LAS)
3.	15	Police
4.	9110	Inspector General of Police
5.	1102	Citizen Police Liaison Committee (CPLC)
6.	1099	Federal Ministry of Human Rights

These helplines are playing a significant role and demonstrate their efficacy in assisting the victims, showcasing tangible effectiveness in supporting the victims of GBV and domestic violence. These helplines operate as crisis intervention facilities, offering information, guidance, protection, and immediate relief to individuals seeking assistance. The helpline staff provides real-time support and guidance over phone, and clients are also offered to visit the facility for further discussions, if necessary.

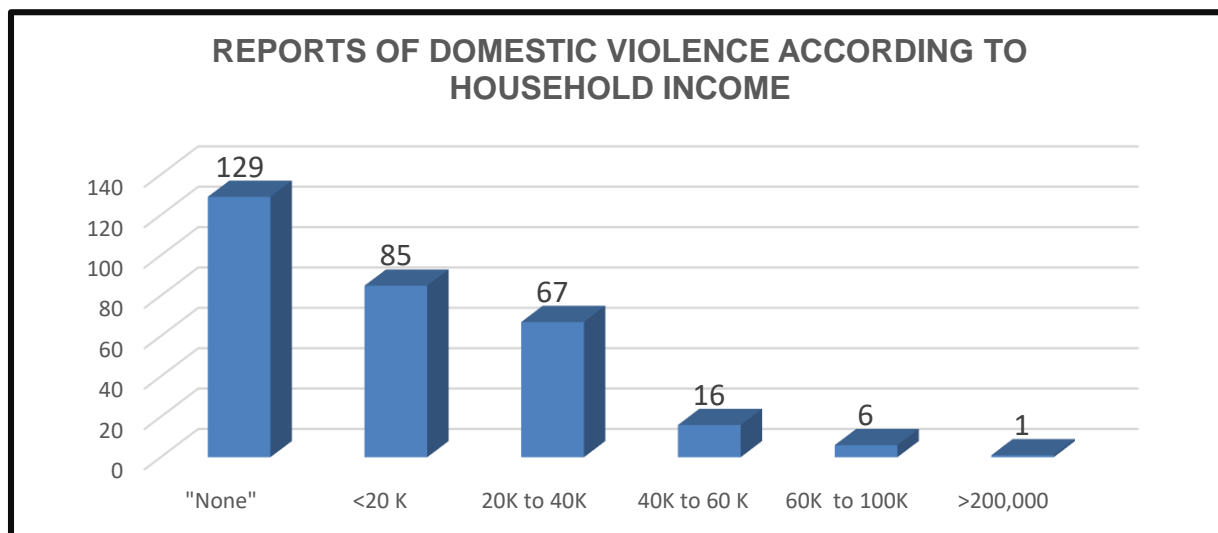
The Women Development Department was supported by UNFPA and Pathfinder, through the Sihah Mand Khandaan Project funded by Global Affairs Canada, to digitalise their data collection systems on the 1094 helpline. The efforts supported the development of the digital dashboard, provision of equipment and trainings in selected districts.

UNFPA and Pathfinder undertook an exercise to determine violence patterns arising, using the data from the WDD dashboard. 304 violence cases were analysed in Analysis Report<sup>6</sup> which underscored the high instances of domestic violence cases from 11 districts in Sindh. The situation also bring into fore the vulnerability of women in our society, especially when they are financially dependent on their husbands/other male family members.



<sup>6</sup> Dashboard Data Analysis (2023) supported by the Pathfinder International. The GBV Dashboard Intervention in Pakistan, which collects and analyzes data on gender-based violence incidents. The report highlights the efforts of the Women Development Department Sindh.

The analysis of the GBV dashboard data also encompassed an examination of the social determinants and factors that either safeguard or make women more vulnerable to domestic violence. Education and age played a pivotal role in the increase of instances of violence; the highest reported cases came from women and girls with no education, between the ages of 25-40. The perpetrator of violence in a majority of the cases reported was the husband. The data from the helpline also demonstrated a correlation between income and instances of violence.



While important to note that the data is limited, helplines serve as a vibrant information system, collecting valuable data about the nature of violence, age distribution of aggressors and victims, and other demographic details. This data-driven approach enables informed decision-making, identifying deficiencies in existing policies and practices, promoting necessary reforms, and ensuring efficient resource utilization. This aligns with the concept that decisions based on data and evidence contribute to lasting systemic changes in addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV).

## PROGRESS

Women who have experienced violence often hesitate to seek help due to societal stigma and normalization of abuse. Instead, they typically turn to family and friends for support. However, having access to formal support services through a helpline can be empowering for those facing adversities.

*"The helpline was my lifeline during a dark time. It not only provided immediate support but also empowered me to take action. I felt heard, understood, and connected to services that helped me rebuild my life." - Survivor seeking Khula due to husband's addiction and unemployment.<sup>7</sup>*

The coordination between helplines and law enforcement agencies has significantly improved, ensuring not only the protection of survivors but also access to essential services like healthcare and legal aid.

<sup>7</sup> Dashboard Data Analysis. GBV Dashboard Intervention in Pakistan, which collects and analyzes data on gender-based violence incidents. Pathfinder International 2023.

*"She informed that she is very happy with the support that she received here and how the team over here helped and talked to her husband and sister-in-law." - Sister of a Survivor of domestic violence, divorce and family issues.<sup>8</sup>*

Collaborative efforts among government departments, civil society organizations, and the community have resulted in positive and impactful outcomes facilitated by helplines.

*"Initially skeptical, we now feel very satisfied with our decision. The Women's Development Department not only contacted the police promptly but ensured our safety. This department is exceptional, and we are grateful we chose to come here." - Family seeking protection for sister facing severe domestic violence.<sup>9</sup>*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the effectiveness of GBV helplines, the following actions are recommended for implementation:

### **Establish a policy framework with budgetary allocations for trainings and human resource development**

It is recommended that the government implement a comprehensive policy framework designed to address digital accessibility challenges in underserved areas. This includes identifying key areas for intervention, setting clear goals for empowerment, and incorporating strategic technological solutions to bridge the digital gender gap. The comprehensive policy should also cover human resource and capacity enhancement needs.

### **Establish a unified data pooling platform:**

Centralise a platform to pool GBV data from various sectors, including police, social welfare, human rights, health, and legal aid providers. This could potentially be housed under the Home Department, and provide a information management system to inform priorities of the Multisectoral Coordination Committee under the leadership of the Chief Secretary, Sindh.

### **Safety protocols, Data confidentiality and Security**

Prioritize the confidentiality and security of survivors' data by implementing stringent access controls, encryption measures, and regular privacy assessments to uphold the highest standards of data safety in helplines.

Enhance the safety of helplines by instituting comprehensive training programs for staff, implementing clear safety protocols, and fostering a supportive environment that encourages open yet safe and secure communication, thereby promoting the well-being of both survivors and helpline staff.

### **Minimize duplication of Services**

To minimize duplication of helpline services, consider establishing a centralized information hub that consolidates resources and coordinates service offerings among various helpline providers. This centralized system can prevent wastage, facilitate quicker response times, and coordinate efforts effectively, resulting in a more organized and impactful assistance mechanism.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.