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Pro-Women Laws in Pakistan: Barriers, Challenges and Way Forward

ABSTRACT

Woman is the pivotal part of any family around whom whole family system revolves. It is she, who is responsible for strengthening or weakening the family ties. When it comes to national life, she has the same role to play as without her participation state cannot progress economically, socially and globally. She is considered to be weak therefore law affords specific protections and safeguards to her. The Constitution of Pakistan, 1973 recognizes her equal status to that of man and the family law also provides different protections and safeguards to her. There have been many pro-women laws in Pakistan, which ensure protections to women. The problem lies with their implementation, as there are many barriers, intrinsic as well as, extrinsic in this regard. The most important issue is the knowledge of these women specific laws or provisions in different laws. This article will provide an overview of these laws, by giving a brief summary of each enactment and then barriers and challenges, alongwith few proposals for their redressal as a way forward will be provided.

Key words: Women protection; Laws; Pakistan; Family; Constitution

INTRODUCTION:

In Pakistan the status of women is a complicated one, as the religion and constitution grants her equal status as that of a man, whereas in reality due to cultural and social norms, she has been treated as if she has lesser value than her counterpart. The issues hindering the implementation of women specific laws create a vacuum and this is where the violence, gender inequality, women rights violations, injustice and cruelty against women grow. The multi-cultural ethnicities and multi-economic backgrounds of people make it difficult for the policymakers to get benefit of already existing laws in this regard. The barriers and challenges are both intrinsic and extrinsic. The intrinsic barriers include but not limited to, dominance of man over woman attitude, role of women in household, neglecting attitude towards female child within the families and superiority of man and consideration of woman as belonging and /or property of man in downtrodden areas of the society; whereas, extrinsic barriers and challenges are educational as well as, legal illiteracy, impacts of socio-cultural bad traditions, impotency of administrative institutions and media, carefree attitude of legal community, judiciary and political parties towards women issues and last but not the least, non-adoption and non implementation of legal reforms by police, judicial organ, NGOs and specialized agencies in this regard. Pakistan while following the international agenda of gender equality and women empowerment has enacted many laws and rules which are pro-women and provide protections in almost every aspect of their family, social and professional lives, yet we have not been able to achieve desired results. This paper will discuss pro-women laws in bit detail, find out few barriers and challenges which hinder the achievement of desired results and in the end will propose few suggestions for the better implementation of these laws.

Pro-Women Legislation in Pakistan:

The Constitution of Pakistan provides fundamental rights under Articles 8 to 28 and these are gender neutral. The Constitution emphasizes on gender equality and promotion of role of women in national life. The Objectives Resolution 1949, Principles of Policy and all the guidelines encourage the role of women in almost every aspect of social, family and professional life. There has been quota system for the encouragement of participation of women in national uplifting, there are all women educational and professional institutions, there are women specific job opportunities in Pakistan. It is pertinent to mention here that the Government of Pakistan has given commitments at

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different international forums regarding women empowerment and uplifting the status of women, which include but not limited to Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); ILO Conventions, GSP+; Beijing Declaration; Sustainable Development Goals, Universal Declaration of Human Rights; Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women; International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD); International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Vienna Convention. Under these commitments Pakistan adopted two major policies at national level i.e. National Plan of Action for Women in 1998 and National Policy on Development and Empowerment of Women in 2002.

In the recent past many pro-women laws and policies have been passed and implemented to avoid gender violence, discrimination and uplift the economic and social status of women. These positive steps must be appreciated as far as government is concerned.

1. The Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act 2016
2. The Punjab Enforcement of Women's Property Rights Act, 2021
3. The Protection of Parents Ordinance, 2021
4. The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010
5. The Punjab Domestic Workers Act 2019
6. Prevention of Trafficking in Person Act 2018
7. Prevention of Smuggling of Migrants Act 2018
8. Punjab Women Protection Authority Act, 2017
9. Punjab Muslim Family Laws (*Amendment*) Act, 2015
10. Punjab Family Courts (*Amendment*) Act, 2015
11. Punjab Marriage Restraint (*Amendment*) Act, 2015
12. Punjab Partition of Immovable Property (*Amendment*) Act, 2015
13. The Punjab Land Revenue (*Amendment*) Act 2015
14. Punjab Fair Representation of Women Act, 2014
15. The Punjab Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace (*Amendment*) Act, 2012

Family Laws including following:-

- a) Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961
- b) Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act 1939
- c) Child Marriages Restraint Act 1929
- d) Family Court Act and Rules 1964/ 65.
- e) The Dowry and Bridal Gifts (*Restraint*) Act 1976

Other Acts and Statutes including following:-

- a) The Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act 2011
- b) The Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act 2011
- c) The Women Distress and Detention Fund 2011
- d) Criminal Law (*Amendment*)(*Offense of Rape*) Act 2016
- e) Criminal Law (*Amendment*) (*Offenses in the name or in pretext of honor*) Act 2016
- f) The National Commission on the Status of Women Act 2012
- g) The National Commission for Human Rights Act 2012
- h) Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016
- i) Hindu Marriage Act 2017

The Government of the Punjab has taken many recent policy initiatives to empower women. Few of those are:-

- Punjab Women Empowerment Package 2012 (PWEP)
- Punjab Women Empowerment Initiatives 2014 (PWEI)
- Punjab Women Empowerment Package 2016 (PWEP)
- Punjab Women Development Policy, 2018

EXPLANATION OF DIFFERENT LAWS:

There have been many enactments as far as protections afforded to women are concerned, as discussed above. However, in this paper few important from the above mentioned will be explained in bit details, to give an idea as to what sort of protections have been provided and what initiatives have been taken in these laws.

The Punjab Protection of Women against Violence Act 2016:

The Act comprises 31 sections and has been enacted to establish an effective protection system for women, providing relief to women as well as, to help them in rehabilitation in case they are victims of violence. This violence includes domestic violence too and the Act is there to provide women enabling environment to play their role in the society. The Act extends to whole of the Punjab. There are almost 19 definitions provided under section 2 of the Act ranging from violence, domestic violence, dependent child, aggrieved person, women protection officer, economic abuse, house, shelter home, to name a few. Domestic violence has been bit broadly defined which includes violence done by someone related to the victim through consanguinity, marriage or adoption; living in a house or has lived together, whereas violence has been separately defined, which includes physical, economical as well as, psychological violence including but not limited to domestic, sexual, stalking, cybercrime, denial of food, clothing, shelter, taking her income, oppressive behavior, limiting freedom of movement to name a few. The Government is obliged to appoint women protection officers and provide universal toll free number, establish protection centres and shelter homes with necessary staff and publicize the Act in Urdu as well as, local languages. Government is also required to establish a database in this regard to provide timely relief to the victims. There are details about court process as far as complaint filing is concerned, where speedy trial mechanism has been provided and court has to decide the matter within 90 days from the filing date of the complaint. The Court is also empowered to pass interim orders and victim's right to residence are not affected. There is a provision for the cases in which protection orders can be passed (section 7); residence order in case of domestic violence (section 8) and monetary orders (section 9) can also be passed in special circumstances as mentioned therein. The Government is bound to establish District Women Protection Committee, headed by DCO and having members as EDO (Health), EDO (Community Development), DO Social Welfare, DPP, representative from the police and District Women Protection Officer as secretary plus other non-official members too. The Committee has to ensure following:-

1. Supervisory functions as far as, protection centres, shelter homes and toll free helpline is concerned;
2. Arrange for trainings of staff and ensure uninterrupted functioning;
3. Create liaison among different departments and agencies;
4. Mediation and reconciliation among parties;
5. To ensure that violence cases are properly registered and decided;
6. Ensure safety of the victim at every stage;
7. Approve plans for protection centres and shelter homes and resolve their problems;
8. Monitoring of all the stakeholders;
9. Making lists of women volunteers and other organizations working in the field;
10. To ensure that minimum standards and SOPs are being followed;
11. Make reports for the Government and suggest improvements in the system.

There are also detailed powers and functions provided in the Act, as far as, Women Protection Officers (section 14) and Protection Centres and Shelter Homes are concerned (section 13). There is a provision for penalty for those filing false complaint of violence, which may be upto 3 months imprisonment and /or fine minimum Rs 50,000 and maximum Rs 100,000/-. The appeal lies to Court of Sessions, which has to decide the appeal within 60 days and its order shall be final.

The Punjab Enforcement of Women's Property Rights Act 2021:

The Act comprises 13 sections and has been enacted to protect and secure women's ownership rights in property. It also extends to whole of the Punjab and ombudsman appointed under Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010 has the power to hear and decide the complaints by such women, where no court proceedings are pending, the ombudsman can probe the matter, call for the record of property, receive reports, do summary enquiry and pass an order of delivery of possession and transfer of ownership of that property to the

complainant woman (section 5). Even ombudsman can refer the matter to the court for in-depth enquiry, recording of evidence and complete adjudication and such civil court has to decide the matter within 60 days. However, where proceedings are pending in the Court, the Ombudsman (section 7) can make preliminary assessment of the complaint and see as if a report can be filed or not and in case no report can be filed, he may advise the complainant to pursue court proceedings and terminate the complaint. Ombudsman has power to direct executive authorities to execute the orders (section 9). Further, under section 11, the orders, actions taken and proceedings before ombudsman are given protections from courts and other authorities.

The Protection of Parents Ordinance 2021:

The Ordinance comprises 8 sections and provides protection to both mother and father. The child who evicts parents can be punished with rigorous imprisonment upto 1 year or/ and with fine. Even parents have been given a right to evict children (section 4) and police can arrest such child without warrant (section 5) upon information from the parent/s. Trial will be conducted by magistrate and appeal shall lie to the Court of Sessions (Sections 6/ 7).

The Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010:

The law has been enacted to protect women from workplace harassment and recognize their dignity as their fundamental right. The Act extends to whole of Pakistan and comprises 13 sections and a schedule (which relates to code of conduct for protection). The harassment under the law includes abuse of authority, creating hostile environment and retaliation as a result of her refusal to grant sexual favor. Under section 2 (h) a comprehensive definition of harassment has also been provided, which not only includes unwelcomed sexual advancement, request for such favor but also verbal or written communications and conducts to name a few. The law urges every organization / institution to form an enquiry committee comprising at least one female as member (section 4). There is an elaboration of procedure for conducting inquiry (section 4) and minor as well as, major penalties ranging from censure, holding promotion to compulsory retirement or removal from the service have been prescribed. The appeal against such penalties can be preferred to Ombudsman within 30 days (section 6). Such Ombudsman's appointment (section 7) and powers and functions (section 8/ 10) have also been discussed. The Act also puts responsibility upon employer (section 11) to ensure that Act has been implemented in letter and spirit as well as, displaying the Act in English and other languages which are understood by the majority of the employees and in case employer does not comply with these rules, a complaint can be filed by the employee in District Court and if found guilty, employer can be fined between Rs 25000 and 100,000/- (section 11). The Act intends to create safe and harassment free working environment for the women at their workplaces and is an embodiment of our state's international commitments regarding international labor standards, women empowerment, Human Rights Declarations, UN Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discriminations against Women as well as, ILO's commitments No 100 and 111 on worker's rights. It also requires all private and public sector organizations to adopt internal mechanisms regarding code of conduct and complaint system to ensure such environment which is conducive for all female employees.

Punjab Domestic Workers Act 2019:

In order to provide protections and good working environment / conditions to domestic workers, this Act has been enacted, which comprises 38 sections. The Act also intends to provide social protection and ensures welfare of such workers. The domestic work (section 2(g)) has been defined as any work done within a house including child care, sick and old care etc. The Act prohibits employing anyone below 15 years of age (section 3). The Act provides a list of rights and entitlements of domestic workers (section 4). There is also a leave and holidays policy given under the Act (section 7). The Act talks of minimum wages (section 8), maternity benefits (section 9), accommodation (section 10), medical examination, vaccination and inoculation (section 11) on yearly basis by employers. Act also prohibits payment below the minimum wages rate (section 19). There is also a provision for registration of domestic workers (section 20) as well as, registration of employers (section 21). In order to provide social safety, welfare and protection, the Government is obliged to establish special fund (section 22). There is also a dispute resolution mechanism (section 25) and appellate authority (section 26) in this regard. The Act also talks of penalties to employer (section 31) and trial has to be conducted by magistrate class 1 (section 34) and labor inspectors (section 35) have been assigned powers to inspect different notified areas under their jurisdiction to ensure implementation of this Act.

Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act 2018:

This Act is to prevent female and children from trafficking and take effective measures in this regard. There is a need to have national as well as, international cooperation as per the Act. Act comprises 16 sections and extends to whole of Pakistan. It declares such acts as non-bailable offence (section 9) and police is given power to investigate (section 8), magistrate class 1 is empowered to try the offence (section 10). Act also talks of compensation to victims (section 13) and emphasizes on the need for raising awareness among masses (section 14).

Prevention of Smuggling of Migrants Act 2018:

It comprises 17 sections and is made to combat the smuggling of migrants including women. The Act emphasizes on collaboration, commitment and punishment to those involved in this inhumane act. Act also ensures safety of smuggled migrants especially women. The Act revolves around three important purposes:-

- (a) To prevent and combat smuggling of migrants;
- (b) To promote and facilitate cooperation at both national and international level; and
- (c) To protect the rights and such smuggled migrants.

FIA and other investigating agencies have been given power to investigate (section 11) and the offence is non-bailable (section 9) and magistrate class 1 has been given power to try the offenses under the Act (section 10).

Family Laws:

Following are glimpses of some of the protections given to women under family laws:-

- At the time of *nikkah* she is fully entitled to give her consent, even she can refuse to enter into marriage tie.
- *Nikkah nama* specifies the delegation of right to divorce i.e. *talaq-e-tafweez*, to wife and she and her family can insist on this right at the time of solemnization of *nikkah* (Column 18 of *Nikkah Nama*).
- In *nikkah nama* if it is not mentioned which part of dower is prompt and which deferred, then whole is treated as prompt (Sec 10 *Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961*) giving favor to wife.
- All the bridal and other gifts during subsistence of marriage belong to her. Further, she is always treated as the sole and exclusive owner of her property.
- In cases where dower is not mentioned at the time of *nikkah*, law makes it obligatory for the husband to pay proper dower and he cannot take the plea that dower was not mentioned, so no dower is payable.
- Husband cannot enter into another marriage without her express authorization or permission of the arbitration council (Sec 6 MFLO, 1961) and the same act by husband without such permission is made punishable.
- If she was given in marriage during her minority by her guardian, she has legal right to repudiate such marriage on the ground of option of puberty, on attaining age of majority.
- If her dower is prompt and on demand husband refuses to pay, she can refuse to cohabit or file suit for recovery of dower amount in family court.
- She has absolute right of maintenance from her husband and in case same is not given she can go to court or the arbitration council and recover the amount as arrears of land revenue.
- She can recover the dower amount even after *talaq* from husband or after death of her husband from his property.
- She has the preferential right of custody, under the law, till certain age of children.
- During period of *iddat* she is entitled to maintenance.
- She has fixed share in the inheritance as widow, mother and daughter.
- She alongwith the arbitration council, is entitled to receive notice of *talaq* and without this notice, *talaq* is not treated as effective (Sec 7 MFLO, 1961).
- Even column 19 of *nikkah nama* states about conditions upon which husband's right of divorce can be curtailed and she can insist on that before solemnization of *nikkah*.
- She has been provided many grounds for dissolution of her marriage under *Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act, 1939* (Sec 2), even the judicial decisions tend to release her on the plea of profound hatred towards the husband.
- Family courts are bound to decide her cases within six months of institution (Sec 12-A *West Pakistan Family Courts Act, 1964*).

- There is also *Dowry and Bridal Gifts (Restraint Act), 1976*, which limits the aggregate value of such things and imposes penalties in case of violation. This Act if implemented in its letter and spirit will help the poor females, in whose marriages wealth is a major barrier.
- As per the latest amendment in MFLO, 1961 (Section 4-A) the property rights of childless Shia widow have been further secured and protected.

Other Laws and Amendments in Existing Laws:

As per Article 25 of the Constitution of Pakistan 1973, all citizens are equal before law and there shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex alone. The same Article allows the State to make special provisions for the protection of women. Further, Article 34 ensures full participation of women in national life. Following five laws have also been amended to give more ease and favor to women:-

- (a) Pakistan Penal Code 1860
- (b) The Criminal Procedure Code 1898
- (c) The Offence of Zina (*Enforcement of Hudoood*) Ordinance 1979
- (d) The Offence of Qazf (*Enforcement of Hudoood*) Ordinance 1979
- (e) The Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act 1939

In **Pakistan Penal Code 1860** following new sections have been added:-

1. 365-B relating to kidnapping, abduction or inducing women to compel for marriage etc.
2. 367-A relating to kidnapping or abducting in order to subject person to unlawful lust.
3. 371-A regarding selling for the purposes of prostitution etc.
4. 371-B regarding buying person for purposes of prostitution etc.
5. The definition and punishment of rape has been further elaborated and enhanced.
6. 493-A regarding cohabitation caused by a man deceitfully inducing a belief of lawful marriage.
7. 496-A regarding enticing or taking away or detaining with criminal intent, a woman.
8. 496-B regarding fornication.
9. 496-C regarding punishment for false accusation of fornication.
10. 509 defines sexual harassment at workplace, home, private spaces, public spaces like buses, parks etc.

In **Criminal Procedure Code 1898** following sections are added to afford further protections to women:-

1. 203-A regarding process of complaint in case of Zina
2. 203-B regarding process of complaint in case of Qazf
3. 203-C regarding process of complaint in case of fornication

It should be noted that amendments in Schedule II of Cr.P.C. 1898 have also made majority of the offences like kidnapping or abduction of women (section 365); habitual dealing in slaves (section 371); selling person for prostitution (section 371-A); buying person for prostitution (section 371-B); unlawful compulsory labor (section 374); rape (section 376) etc as non-bailable offences as well as, non compoundable too. The Criminal Laws (*Protection of Women*) Amendment Act 2006 can also be consulted for further details in this regard.

Barriers and Challenges:

There are detailed laws and policies dealing with protections and promotion of women empowerment in Pakistan. The socio-political structures, cultural practices, illiteracy, economic dependency and lack of will from all the policy makers and implementers are few of the reasons that we are unable to achieve desired results. The role of women themselves has been very crucial in this regard, as in majority of cases, the violator and abuser is the person known to her as a family member, as a colleague, as an elder, as husband or brother and under the societal and family pressure; she does not press the charges or highlight the issue. The women also need to come forward and make sure that justice is done. Following are major barriers and challenges faced by the above mentioned laws and implementation of these is hindered:-

1. Male behavior within the families is a major problem.

2. In patriarchal society there are cultural issues too, which firstly hinder the formation of these laws and if state is successful in formulating the laws, these stop the women to take steps towards implementation of their rights in case of violations.
3. Illiteracy and fear of society is also main cause in this regard.
4. Incapacity of administrative institutions and judge towards implementation.
5. Biased and money orientated approach of majority of the NGOs in this regard, where they only take up cases which can be highlighted at international forums to grab more funding.
6. Lack of awareness and educational opportunities for women.
7. Lack of political, judicial and administrative will.
8. Treatment of women as objects and not as subjects.
9. Gender discrimination and inequality at every level.
10. Lack of trust on judicial system and police.
11. Unfair customary laws (wani, swera, watta-satta) and social pressure
12. Negative role of parallel quasi-judicial and extra-judicial system including but not limited to jirgas, panchayats etc. Although the Sindh High Court (2004 PCrLJ 1523) and Supreme Court of Pakistan in 2005 declared these jirgas as unconstitutional yet, we know that they are very much there with their full powers and might.
13. Wrong and/ or narrow interpretation of Sharia laws.
14. Non-implementation of laws.
15. Sexual violence and emotional torture is not taken seriously within family or society.
16. There is great gap in salaries when it comes to genders.
17. Poor healthcare system violating the maternity rights.
18. Lack of representation of women in decision making at every level from family to government.
19. Weak institutional structure and inconsistency in policies especially criminal justice institutions lack coordination and have inadequate infrastructure, expertise and workforce.
20. Judicial processes are technical, complex, not free and cumbersome for women.
21. Lack of expertise as far as police and prosecutors are concerned.
22. No or very little knowledge of these laws, even people who are well educated don't know about 20% of these women specific laws which are applicable in Pakistan and in case of violation where to go and how to proceed.

Solutions and Way Forward:

In order to overcome these issues the State has to adopt a holistic approach. There is a dire need to start a campaign for the awareness of public in general and women in particular as, ignorance of these laws, is the biggest barrier and hurdle. In short following steps, if taken would help the policy makers and legislators to at least lessen the barriers and cope up with the challenges in implementation and desired results can be achieved:-

1. Entire legal and administrative system has to be overhauled.
2. Number of female policy makers, administrators and judges must be increased.
3. There should be specialized gender based violence courts.
4. There should be gender inclusivity in law and administration.
5. Positive role should be played by the media, NGOs and educational institutions, in order to create awareness among masses especially female students need to know their rights and forums in case of violation of those rights.
6. The measures to promote women participation in politics, policy making and legal reforms, must be increased.
7. Introduction of compulsory courses and/ or seminars in colleges and universities, creating awareness regarding gender discrimination and gender based violence, should be started. The first step should be to disseminate the knowledge about presence of these laws, the girls should be aware of their rights, the laws and forums available to help them out in case they are victims of violence, abuses, harassment and family issues.
8. Tangible implementation measures must be created to monitor implementation of such laws.
9. Social, electronic and print media are good platforms to start the campaign for awareness of women specific laws and institutions. At least a debate will be generated in the first place, which will raise questions and at the later stages solutions will start coming from the societal discussions.

10. Families need to change their mindsets towards daughters education, grooming and professional life. Things have changed positively during the past two three decades, yet a lot has to be done further. The girls in families need confidence from within the families and this confidence will make them more confident and self-reliant in their future family, social and professional life. It is the duty of the families to encourage their daughters to take their daily educational and other decisions by themselves; this training from within the families will have everlasting effects upon the confidence and capacity building of females.
11. State should make policy by taking ulema on board to disseminate awareness regarding women empowerment and protection as well as, importance of role of women in the nation building and uplifting, through their sermons in religious gatherings and daily (esp. Friday) prayers.
12. The curriculum especially 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th years, should include chapters which raise questions regarding these social, legal and cultural issues during class discussions and exams, so that from the teenage the young generation should have some awareness and understanding. This will help the nation in the long run, as this teen will one day become policy maker, law maker, administrator and head of family and the awareness of the problem and knowledge of the gravity of issue of women emancipation, will help them work in positive direction in this regard.
13. State needs to adopt short term as well as, long term strategies towards the issue. Laws have been made, institutions are there, policies have been formulated, commitments made; but need is to come with holistic and proactive approach in which state has to take on board almost all segments of society.

CONCLUSION:

Rights of women are not limited to the above as the list is very extensive and exhaustive. The law is accessible and available in statute books; however the main problem is lack of awareness of legal rights among the masses esp. women. Further, male members of family play a crucial role in usurping the rights of ignorant sisters, daughters, mothers and wives. On the other hand, our family structure does not allow and encourage a woman to stand for her rights against her [beloved] brother, father, son or husband. The situation is bleak only because, majority of us are still living the lives of pre-Islamic Arabia, where girl was treated as a burden and symbol of disgrace for father and brothers, who always tried to get rid of her ASAP. The so called master and doctorate degrees have not changed the mentality in this regard; even mothers give preferential rights and status to the boys, while distributing the wealth, inheritance and other properties. As stated earlier, the law is there with full protection to women in shape of different acts, ordinances and statutes, however, need of the time is to change the mindset through proper education, dissemination of these laws, strict enforcement and punishments to violators, so that the main pillar of family as well as the State i.e. woman must be made more secure, healthy, prosperous and strong.

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3. Criminal Law (Amendment)(Offense of Rape) Act 2016
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5. Family Court Act 1964
6. Family Court Rules 1965.
7. Hindu Marriage Act 2017
8. Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961
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