

Pakistan to create 1,000 courts to tackle violence against women

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Chief justice says in televised speech that abuse survivors will be able to ‘speak their heart without any fear’

[Pakistan](#) is to set up more than 1,000 courts dedicated to tackling violence against women, the country’s top judge has announced, seeking to tackle a problem activists say the criminal justice system has long neglected.

Chief justice Asif Saeed Khosa said the special courts would allow victims to speak out without fear of retaliation in the conservative Muslim country, where domestic violence is often seen as taboo.

Pakistan sees thousands of cases of violence against women every year, from rape and acid attacks to sexual assault, kidnappings and [so-called honour killings](#).

“We are going to have 1,016 gender-based violence courts across Pakistan, at least one such court apiece in every district,” Khosa said in an address to fellow judges broadcast on national television. “The atmosphere of these courts will be different from other courts so that complainants can speak their heart without any fear,” he said.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an independent watchdog, reported at least 845 incidents of sexual violence against women in its 2018 report.

There were no comparative figures and the commission had previously said violence against women went largely unreported, particularly in rural areas, where poverty and stigma prevented victims from speaking out.

The country was ranked the sixth most dangerous for women in a Thomson Reuters Foundation a survey of global experts last year.

The new courts will operate in existing courthouses, but will hold domestic violence hearings separately from other cases to enable victims to testify in confidence.

A pilot court of this kind was opened in 2017 in Punjab, Pakistan’s most populous province.

Local high court chief justice Mansoor Ali Shah said at the time that women were the most vulnerable members of society and that one in every three had been a victim of physical or psychological violence.

Human rights campaigners said the Lahore court had been a success and welcomed the move to expand the programme.

Romana Bashir, who heads the Peace and Development Foundation, a non-governmental organisation working on women's rights, said it was "a wonderful safeguarding measure".

"Certainly women will be encouraged and feel strengthened to speak up against gender based violence. Consequently, women will be able to get justice," she said.

Fauzia Viqar, a women's rights campaigner who advised the Punjab government until last month, said studies had shown the performance of such dedicated courts to be "many times better than other courts".

Reuters

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