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## THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS

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### **Abstract:**

*Civil society plays a crucial role in the promotion and protection of human rights by acting as a bridge between the state and the public. In Pakistan, civil society organizations (CSOs) have been instrumental in raising awareness about human rights issues, advocating for policy reforms, and providing legal and social support to marginalized communities. Despite challenges such as political repression, limited resources, and societal barriers, CSOs in Pakistan have managed to push for significant changes in human rights legislation and provide a voice to the voiceless. This article explores the role of civil society in promoting human rights in Pakistan, analyzing its successes, challenges, and the impact it has had on shaping public discourse and policy. The study examines the interaction between government bodies and civil society organizations, highlighting their collaborative and adversarial roles in the fight for human rights.*

**Keywords:** *Civil Society, Human Rights, Policy Advocacy, Social Justice*

## INTRODUCTION

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The role of civil society in promoting human rights is widely recognized across the globe, especially in contexts where state institutions are either too weak or unwilling to uphold these rights. In Pakistan, where human rights violations persist across various sectors, civil society organizations (CSOs) have emerged as key players in advocating for justice, equality, and the protection of fundamental freedoms. This article investigates the evolving role of civil society in Pakistan, with a particular focus on the legal, social, and political contexts in which these organizations operate. It explores the intersection of grassroots activism, legal advocacy, and international human rights norms, analyzing how civil society organizations influence both public opinion and government policy regarding human rights issues.

### **1. The Role of Civil Society Organizations in Promoting Human Rights**

#### **The Contribution of NGOs and Grassroots Organizations in Human Rights Advocacy:**

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Pakistan play a central role in human rights advocacy, often stepping in where state institutions fail to ensure the protection of citizens' rights. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots movements have been at the forefront of efforts to address social injustice, discrimination, and the violation of human rights across the country. These organizations are key actors in providing services, advocating for policy changes, and raising public awareness about human rights issues.

NGOs, such as the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and the Aurat Foundation, have long been involved in advocating for civil and political rights, economic and social rights, and the rights of marginalized communities. They engage in policy dialogue with government authorities, conduct human rights research, and document violations. These organizations are also instrumental in public campaigns aimed at raising awareness about specific human rights issues, such as child labor, violence against women, and the rights of religious minorities.

Grassroots organizations have a particularly important role in mobilizing communities at the local level, facilitating access to legal aid, and offering platforms for advocacy. They often operate in areas where the state's presence is limited, acting as a conduit for the demands of vulnerable populations to be heard in national forums.

#### **Legal Support Provided by CSOs in Addressing Human Rights Violations:**

CSOs in Pakistan, through various legal aid programs and partnerships with law firms, play a pivotal role in providing legal assistance to individuals whose human rights have been violated. Organizations such as the Legal Aid Society, the Women's Action Forum (WAF), and the Justice Project Pakistan (JPP) provide free or low-cost legal services to victims of human rights abuses, particularly women, children, and ethnic and religious minorities.

These CSOs provide support in navigating Pakistan's legal system, helping victims to file complaints, represent themselves in court, and claim justice. They also act as advocates for systemic reforms within the judicial system to ensure that laws are enforced and that perpetrators of human rights violations are held accountable. The provision of legal aid is crucial in a country where access to justice is often limited by financial constraints, social status, or gender.

Moreover, civil society's role extends to providing training for legal professionals and law enforcement officials to raise awareness about human rights protections and ensure better implementation of human rights laws. CSOs work to improve the quality of justice by addressing systemic barriers to access, such as the cost of legal proceedings, corruption, and judicial delays.

## **Awareness Campaigns and Public Education on Human Rights:**

Public education and awareness campaigns are central to civil society's efforts to promote human rights in Pakistan. CSOs frequently organize workshops, seminars, and media campaigns to inform the public about their rights and how to protect them. These campaigns address a wide array of issues, from promoting gender equality and women's rights to advocating for freedom of speech and religious tolerance.

One of the significant efforts in this regard has been the focus on educating marginalized communities about their legal rights, particularly in rural areas where there is a general lack of awareness. CSOs also partner with media outlets to spread messages of human rights and social justice, using television, radio, and social media platforms to reach a broader audience. By increasing public awareness, civil society organizations empower individuals to act when their rights are violated and to demand accountability from the state.

## **2. Key Areas of Focus for Civil Society in Pakistan**

### **Women's Rights and Gender Equality:**

One of the primary areas of focus for civil society organizations in Pakistan is advancing women's rights and achieving gender equality. Women in Pakistan continue to face significant barriers to equal rights, including gender-based violence, discrimination in the workplace, limited access to education, and restricted participation in public life. CSOs such as the Aurat Foundation, the Women's Action Forum (WAF), and the Pakistan Women's Lawyers Association (PWLA) have worked tirelessly to address these challenges by advocating for legislative reforms, supporting victims of violence, and raising awareness about gender discrimination.

Civil society has been instrumental in pushing for laws aimed at protecting women's rights, such as the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act and the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act. However, much work remains to be done to eliminate deeply rooted cultural and societal barriers that perpetuate gender inequality, especially in rural areas and more conservative regions of the country.

### **Minority Rights, Particularly for Religious and Ethnic Minorities:**

Religious and ethnic minorities in Pakistan, including Hindus, Christians, and Ahmadis, face widespread discrimination and violence. Civil society organizations have been crucial in advocating for the protection of minority rights, both through legal support and public campaigns. Groups such as the National Commission for Justice and Peace (NCJP) and the Minority Rights Commission have worked to raise awareness of the issues faced by religious minorities and to call for stronger protections.

These organizations have also highlighted the misuse of Pakistan's blasphemy laws, which disproportionately affect religious minorities. Through advocacy, legal support, and public education, civil society works to protect the rights of these communities and to ensure that they have the same legal protections as the majority Muslim population.

### **Press Freedom and the Right to Information:**

Press freedom and the right to information are fundamental components of human rights, and civil society in Pakistan has been at the forefront of defending these rights. The Pakistani media has faced significant challenges, including censorship, threats to journalists, and restrictions on press freedom. Civil society organizations such as the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) and the Media Foundation have been actively involved in advocating for the protection of press freedom, highlighting attacks on journalists, and promoting the right to information.

These organizations also work to ensure that media outlets are free from government interference and that journalists can report without fear of retaliation. The right to information is critical for the functioning of a democratic society, and civil society continues to push for stronger legislation to protect this right and increase transparency in government actions.

### **Child Labor, Education, and Social Justice for Marginalized Communities:**

Child labor remains a serious issue in Pakistan, with millions of children working in hazardous conditions instead of attending school. Civil society organizations such as the Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC) and the Bonded Labour Liberation Front (BLLF) work to combat child labor and ensure that children have access to education. These organizations advocate for stronger enforcement of labor laws, support children who have been exploited, and raise awareness about the importance of education as a tool for social mobility.

CSOs also work to address other issues related to social justice for marginalized communities, including the rights of disabled individuals, refugees, and rural populations. They provide access to education, healthcare, and social services for these groups and advocate for policies that reduce social inequality and promote inclusivity.

## **3. Challenges Faced by Civil Society Organizations in Promoting Human Rights**

### **Political Repression and Threats to Freedom of Association:**

Civil society organizations in Pakistan often face political repression from the state, which sees their advocacy as a challenge to its authority. NGOs and grassroots organizations are frequently subject to government scrutiny, with some being accused of receiving foreign funding to undermine national security or destabilize the state. In some cases, organizations advocating for human rights have faced closures, restrictions, or harassment by government authorities.

The state's crackdown on civil society has resulted in a chilling effect, with some organizations opting for self-censorship out of fear of retaliation. Additionally, activists and human rights defenders in Pakistan are often subject to threats, violence, and intimidation. These challenges hinder the ability of civil society to operate freely and effectively.

## **Financial Constraints and Dependence on Foreign Funding:**

Many civil society organizations in Pakistan rely heavily on foreign funding to carry out their activities. This financial dependence poses challenges, as it can make CSOs vulnerable to political pressure and accusations of foreign influence. Moreover, the lack of domestic financial support for human rights organizations limits their capacity to expand their operations and reach marginalized communities.

Financial constraints also affect the sustainability of many organizations, particularly those working in rural or underprivileged areas where resources are scarce. Without adequate funding, CSOs struggle to implement long-term projects or scale their efforts, limiting their impact.

## **Societal Resistance to Human Rights Reforms:**

In some parts of Pakistan, there is significant resistance to human rights reforms, particularly those that challenge traditional cultural norms. For example, advocacy for women's rights, the protection of religious minorities, and the fight against child labor are often met with societal opposition rooted in religious conservatism, patriarchy, and entrenched social hierarchies. This resistance can take the form of public protests, political lobbying, or direct action to prevent reforms.

Civil society organizations often face significant hurdles in changing public attitudes and behaviors, especially in rural areas where traditional values are more deeply ingrained. Overcoming this resistance requires long-term efforts in education, awareness, and community engagement.

## **Legal Hurdles and Lack of Support from Government Bodies:**

Despite the significant role that CSOs play in advocating for human rights, they often face legal challenges in their efforts to hold the government accountable. Laws that restrict the formation of NGOs, the registration of organizations, and the ability to fundraise or receive foreign aid make it difficult for civil society to operate freely. The lack of support from government bodies for human rights organizations also limits their ability to influence policy or initiate meaningful reforms.

In some cases, legal challenges arise when CSOs take legal action against human rights violations or challenge government decisions in court. The slow and inefficient judicial process often delays justice, leaving victims of human rights abuses without adequate recourse.

## **4. Impact of Civil Society on Human Rights Legislation and Policy Reforms**

### **Civil Society's Influence on National Human Rights Legislation:**

Civil society organizations have played a critical role in shaping Pakistan's human rights legislation. Through sustained advocacy, public campaigns, and legal actions, CSOs have influenced the passage of several important laws aimed at protecting the rights of women, children, and minorities. One example is the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, which was passed after years of advocacy by organizations like the Aurat Foundation and WAF.

CSOs have also been involved in pushing for the ratification of international human rights treaties and the strengthening of domestic laws to align with international standards. They have worked to ensure that Pakistan’s legal framework provides adequate protection for fundamental human rights, even in the face of political opposition.

## The Role of CSOs in Shaping Public Policies on Gender Equality, Minority Rights, and Freedom of Expression:

CSOs in Pakistan have been instrumental in shaping public policies on gender equality, minority rights, and freedom of expression. Through policy dialogues with the government, research, and advocacy campaigns, CSOs have influenced policy changes aimed at reducing gender-based violence, promoting access to education for girls, and improving the legal protection of minority communities.

These organizations have also been active in defending press freedom and the right to information, pushing for policies that allow journalists to report freely and without fear of retaliation. In recent years, there has been significant progress in securing policies that promote freedom of expression, although challenges remain.

## Case Studies of Successful Advocacy Efforts and Policy Changes in Pakistan:

One notable case study is the role of civil society in advocating for the Child Marriage Restraint Act, which raised the legal marriage age for girls in Pakistan to 18. After years of advocacy by organizations like SPARC, the law was passed in 2015, marking a significant victory for women’s rights and child protection.

Another example is the passage of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2018, which was influenced by the efforts of CSOs such as the Gender Interactive Alliance. The law recognizes the rights of transgender people to self-identify and access healthcare, education, and employment opportunities.

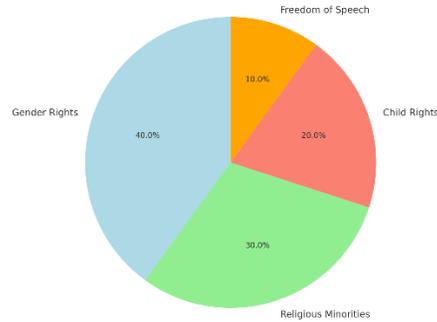
## Graphs with Descriptions:



Graph 1: Number of Civil Society Organizations in Pakistan (2000–2025)

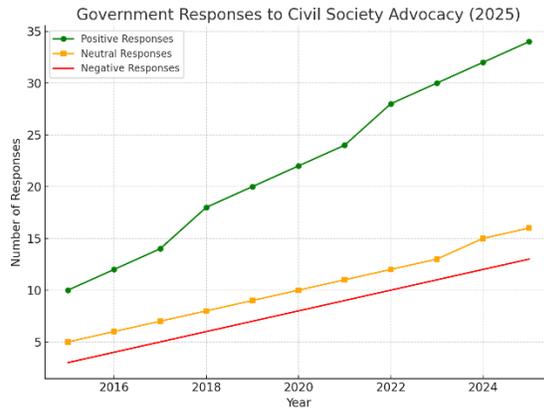
**Description:** A bar chart illustrating the growth in the number of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Pakistan over the past two decades, highlighting the increasing role of civil society in human rights advocacy.

Key Human Rights Issues Addressed by Civil Society in Pakistan (2025)



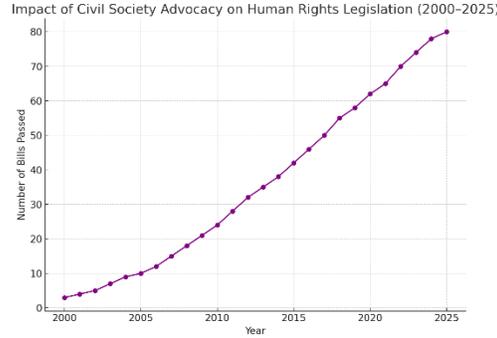
**Graph 2: Key Human Rights Issues Addressed by Civil Society in Pakistan (2025)**

**Description:** A pie chart depicting the distribution of human rights issues addressed by CSOs in Pakistan, including gender rights, religious minorities, child rights, and freedom of speech.



**Graph 3: Government Responses to Civil Society Advocacy (2025)**

**Description:** A line graph showing the frequency of government responses (positive, neutral, and negative) to civil society advocacy campaigns in Pakistan over the past decade, demonstrating the changing dynamics of state-civil society relations.



**Graph 4: Impact of Civil Society Advocacy on Human Rights Legislation (2000–2025)**

**Description:** A line graph tracking the number of human rights-related bills passed in Pakistan, correlated with the frequency of advocacy campaigns led by CSOs, indicating their influence on legislative outcomes.

### Summary:

Civil society in Pakistan plays a fundamental role in advocating for human rights and pushing for significant policy reforms. Through the collective efforts of various CSOs, including non-governmental organizations, media outlets, and advocacy groups, the country has witnessed improvements in areas such as women’s rights, education, and minority protections. However, these organizations face significant challenges, including political suppression, financial instability, and societal resistance. Despite these challenges, civil society has achieved some notable successes, particularly in influencing human rights legislation and policy changes. This article emphasizes the need for a supportive environment for CSOs in Pakistan, advocating for stronger legal protections and financial autonomy to ensure the continued promotion of human rights in the country.

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