



JUSTICE RIFFAT INAM BUTT

Secretary of Pakistan's Law & Justice Commission

Podcast Insights

Justice Beyond the Bench

Key Insights of the Podcast with Justice Riffat Inam Butt

In a justice system strained by over 2.3 million pending cases and staggering gender disparities, Justice Riffat Inam Butt stands out not just for her judicial wisdom but for her unwavering advocacy for equity, institutional reform, and female representation in Pakistan's legal architecture. In a compelling podcast conversation hosted by Accountability Lab, as part of the UN Women-supported "Strengthening Women's Representation in the Pakistani Judiciary" campaign, Justice Riffat offers a panoramic and deeply introspective view of Pakistan's judicial system—from its inherited hierarchies and systemic flaws to its yet unrealized potential for gender justice.

From Narowal to the Bench: A Journey Rooted in Service

Justice Riffat's early life in Narowal—bordered by Sialkot and Gujranwala—shaped her values of discipline, empathy, and resilience. Encouraged by a supportive family and guided by strong maternal role models, she chose to pursue law at Punjab University, not out of immediate passion, but influenced by an aunt who envisioned legal education as a tool for social change. That intuition proved prophetic. What began as a reluctant enrollment turned into a powerful awakening. "Law is not just a degree—it's a toolkit for justice," she reflects. From the courtroom to policy advocacy, she used that toolkit to break stereotypes, advance gender rights, and inspire the next generation of women in the judiciary.

Law as Advocacy: Counseling over Litigation

Justice Riffat's entry into legal practice was marked by a critical departure from mainstream practice. Instead of seeking high-profile clients, she devoted herself to advocacy for women in distress—particularly victims of domestic violence, property disputes, and forced marriages. Her approach was as empathetic as it was strategic: "First, you must help a woman reconcile with her own problem—then only can a lawyer, mediator, or judge assist her," she explains. This people-centered philosophy made her more than a legal practitioner; she became a mentor and lifeline for countless women navigating a system designed to marginalize them.

Breaking Barriers in a Male-Dominated System

Justice Riffat was the first woman from her city to pass the competitive judicial services exam. From her first posting in Kasur to subsequent roles in Lahore, she faced systemic resistance—not only from court bureaucracies but also from societal norms that questioned women in leadership. Yet, she persevered. "A woman in law has to survive an ecosystem where support staff wield undue influence, and files don't move unless pushed," she recounts. Her journey reflects the harsh reality that merit alone does not guarantee progress—resilience does.

Unmasking Systemic Flaws: From Overburdened Courts to Informal Injustice

With Pakistan's judiciary functioning with only 3,000 judges for a population of over 235 million, Justice Riffat stresses that procedural dysfunction—not a lack of legal provisions—is at the heart of delayed justice. Stay orders, adjournments, and procedural lapses continue to clog the system, and even well-

intentioned judges are often unable to provide relief due to institutional inertia. In rural areas, she notes, the weaponization of court orders—used by powerful litigants to intimidate or delay—is rampant. "People think justice is control, not resolution," she says, pointing to the cultural egotism that prevents true reconciliation.

Her diagnosis is clear: Without automation, digitization, and systemic reform, legislation alone cannot restore justice. "Every year, we pass new laws. But do we allocate budget for their enforcement? Almost never," she observes—a sentiment echoed by numerous stakeholders in the UN Women project's theory of change.

Women in Law: Why Representation Matters

A central pillar of the project is to enhance women's presence in the legal system—not just symbolically, but structurally. Justice Riffat is a powerful advocate for this shift. With only a few thousand women among 200,000 registered lawyers, and just 15% of district judiciary composed of women, the gap is glaring. But the real tragedy, she insists, lies in the leaky pipeline: while women earn law degrees in good numbers, very few enter practice.

"Parents boast about their daughters holding LLB degrees, but don't encourage them to enter courtrooms," she notes. The cultural discomfort with women in adversarial spaces—and the lack of mentorship, safety, and systemic support—forces many capable women to abandon the field. Her call to action is clear: "We need data, we need support systems, and we need cultural acceptance that women can lead in courts—not just follow."

Making Courts Work for Women: Reform from Within

Justice Riffat's insights align squarely with the objectives of the UN Women-supported project, which aims to increase women's entry and leadership in justice sector institutions. To achieve this, she outlines a blueprint:

- **Legal Awareness Campaigns:** "A woman deprived of inheritance often doesn't even know what a mutation is," she says. Tools like legal chatbots, FM radio, and social media can close this gap.
- **Support Systems for Women Litigants:** "Where does a woman go when denied property? We need advisory desks, paralegal networks, and visible pathways for redress."
- **Curriculum Reform and Legal Skills Training:** Law must be taught not just as theory, but as a practical skill. "Today's graduates can't draft a petition, let alone argue it," she warns.
- **Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR):** Justice Riffat leads a national ADR task force to reduce the case backlog by resolving disputes outside formal courts. "Not every fight needs to go to trial. Mediation is justice too."
- **Judicial Digitization:** With 20 million cases filed and decided in five years, yet 2.3 million still pending, Justice Riffat underscores that technology is not a luxury—it's a necessity.

Towards Gender-Responsive Justice

On gender sensitivity in judgments, she asserts, "Women judges are often more decisive and efficient—not because they're biologically different, but because they've lived the realities of their litigants."

She recounts the compassionate yet practical advice she gave a woman seeking divorce: “I won’t stop you. But what is your plan to raise your children?” Her point is simple—justice must be rooted in realism, not rhetoric.

Her views support the project’s theory of change: If women are provided space, mentorship, and tools to lead in the legal system, not only will gender representation rise, but justice itself will become more accessible, equitable, and effective.

Justice Riffat ends with a powerful message:

“Your perseverance, commitment, and belief in your full personality is what defines your place. We are not half a mind or half a person. We are complete—and we must claim that.”

Her journey embodies the spirit of "Strengthening Women’s Representation in the Pakistani Judiciary" project - a difference that is visible, actionable, and transformational. Through voices like hers, the Pakistani legal system can move from exclusion to inclusion, from inefficiency to reform, and from silence to justice.