

War on Women

The sickness is universal. No country in the world is free from it. But in Pakistan, violence against women is endemic and, apparently, on the increase. Only a fraction of the atrocities is reported in the press.

I have in hand the Dawn of February 21. The following news items appear on page 7: Three females, not named, were murdered in Sukkur. Bibi Mehnaz, 10 years old, was kidnapped on Friday, raped, slaughtered, and thrown into a forest. Hakimzadi was shot dead by her brothers-in-law Shammo and Chibber; the scene of this murder is not mentioned. Fahmida was killed in Rohri by Irshad Mangi. In Rawalpindi, Samina Mushtaq was shot on Circular Road by her husband Khalid Nadim; she died on the spot.

This is a mere glimpse of an environment saturated with victimisation of women. The perpetrators of a large variety of crimes against women - men ranging from the lowly peasant and policeman to anointed MNAs and MPAs - largely go unpunished. Often, the victim herself is subjected to punishment and social sanctions. When a battered bride flees to her parent's home, she is generally told to return to her husband. After all, a good wife is expected to quietly suffer some physical abuse, and neither custom nor economics compel a reversal of this expectation. But battering can end lives. "In nearly half of the four hundred odd cases of domestic violence reported during the year, says the Human Rights Commission for Pakistan's [HRCP] 1993 report, "the wife ended up dead."

For women so trapped in oppressive relationships there is virtually no escape in rural areas, and only a slim chance of relief in large cities where institutions like the Edhi Trust's Apna Ghar in Karachi offer shelter to aggrieved women. Such facilities are rare in our cities. In some cities, the government has opened sanctuaries loftily called Darul Aman. These, informs the HRCP's annual report, "often tended to be used by the law as a place for captivity. Of 45 inmates in one such centre, at one point the High Court was petitioned for the release of 17. Seven were released and the rest were asked to apply to convicting magistrates."

As the vast literature on slavery in ante-bellum American South shows, entrapped and oppressed people tend to find relief in fantasy and an occasional, impassioned rebellion. Virtually no historical or sociological research has been done on Pakistan's subordinated half. We know very little about the behavioural patterns of abused women. What we do get are occasional glimpses of a most horrifying reality which hide in the inner sanctums of our society and our consciousness.

A decade ago, Akhtar Baloch wrote a searing account of women who were serving life sentences in a Sindhi prison. All but a few of these 'lifers' had been convicted of murder; and most admitted to their crime. Each had killed - surreptitiously by poisoning, or violently with an axe or a knife - someone close to her, father, brother, brother-in-law, or the husband himself. Behind the killing lay a life of grief and oppression, relief through fantasy, a proclivity to break out in anger and passion. A noteworthy fact: women who earn capital sentences in Pakistan are not as few as one might imagine. I am not able to locate a nationwide figure; but in 1993 fifteen women were under death sentence in Multan jail alone.

Rape is the most common form, world-wide, of violence against women. In this Islamic Republic, it is an epidemic. HRCP offers an estimate: A woman was raped every three hours during 1993. Two were gang raped every day. And half of those assaulted were minors or teenagers. Rape victims are often murdered after they have been raped. HRCP mentions young victims ranging in age from five to fifteen. It also cites numerous cases

of landlords, politicians, and police officers engaging in crimes against women including minors. As a rule, the crimes are committed with the aid or knowledge of one or more persons. In other words, they are not merely the product of individual pathology; they are perpetrated in a social context.

It is painful for me to underscore the pervasiveness of violence against women in our society as it would inevitably draw on personal knowledge. Middle and upper class people in Pakistan live in islands of prosperity. They have built around themselves illusions of good, secure lives. What many parents do not wish to acknowledge is that in a society so steeped in corruption and hypocrisy their own children can not be entirely safe. As a teacher in the United States, I have seen the wounds these children of the privileged class bear. In the relatively freer and self-aware environment of the foreign university, they often open those wounds to a trusted advisor or a professional counsellor. An astounding number of girls from elite families were subjected in their early, vulnerable years to sexual abuse by a cousin, a step brother, a younger uncle, or servants. Given the taboo, they silently bore the pain and humiliation. They were all hurt.

A distinguishing feature then of violence against women in Pakistan is that it is a widespread though grossly under-reported, under-analysed, and unattended social evil. How can we explain the prevalence of so much sexual violence in a culture which puts such high value on women's honour and sexual discipline? And what explains the indifference which successive governments have shown toward this problem? An answer to these questions would inevitably lead to a focus on the second distinction: the decades old collusion of politics and religion in Pakistan.

As the HRCP report underlines, the pattern of violence against women suggests not so much personal deviation but social and political pathology so deeply ingrained that we confer upon it the legitimacy of religion and laws. The collusion of state power with the self-styled Islamic parties climaxed in the regime of Mohammed Ziaul Haq. The most offensive among the discriminatory laws were imposed during this dictatorship. The Hudood laws render prosecution for rape well nigh impossible. Rather they expose the victims of rape to conviction for Zina. This travesty of Islam was dramatised when Safia Bibi, the rape-impregnated teenager was convicted of Zina. Being blind, she could neither identify her violators nor produce the required 'eye witnesses' to prove either her violators guilt or her innocence. So she was sentenced to death by stoning.

Public outcry saved Safia Bibi from this outrageous legal sentence. Yet, the laws under which she was sentenced remain - six years after its promulgator is gone, half a decade after the restoration of democracy in Pakistan. These laws against justice continue to perpetuate inequality and injustice in our society. Seventy to eighty percent of women prisoners in Pakistan today were charged under these iniquitous Hadood laws. Zina (extra-marital fornication) charges are the easiest to stick on women; men, its largest practitioners, are rarely convicted of it. For an example, we turn again to the HRCP's courageous report: In Punjab, 785 women were in prison in 1993. Of these, 387 were being held under the Zina laws.

Devaluation of women is sanctified by the laws and institutions of Pakistan. The Hudood laws are not the only travesties of law, democracy, and religion. There are myriads of other forms by which women are reduced to a less than equal status. Our inheritance laws discriminate against them. The Diyat and Qisas laws reduce her to half a person. Our political parties seek their vote while denying them representation. There are only four women in a National Assembly of 217 members; one in the Senate of 87; and three in the four provincial assemblies. Of the nine ILO Conventions on the rights of women workers, Pakistan has signed only one - on maternity leave. Successive governments including the ones led by a woman prime minister have failed to ratify the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Concerned, educated citizens, not politicians, are the motor of change and reform. In living, dynamic societies they organise to protest and progress, and to supply healthy, fresh blood into the body politic. It is a promising sign that there exists in Pakistan a vigorous women's movement. It is a tragedy that it is fragmented and far too confined to the upper strata of society. But a greater tragedy is the lack of organised commitment on the part of the male intelligentsia to join the women in a movement of social change. On March 8, National Women's Day, there will be marches in major cities, to rid Pakistan of a dictator's draconian laws against women. I hope it shall also be a day of male solidarity with the Muslim woman.

EQBAL AHMAD [27th February, 1994]