**Femicide in Pakistan**

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Few things seem to sound as brutal as the murder of Noor Mukaddam, the 27-year-old girl who was beheaded by her boyfriend in the federal capital on the eve of Eid-ul-Azha. Yet, incidents of equal brutality occur every day in various parts of the country and go largely unreported because of which we like to believe that such cruelty being meted out to women is rare and exceptional.

However, in the last few weeks, our newspapers and social media feeds have been littered with stories of crimes against women, whereby every atrocity sounds worse than the last. Two cases of femicide—Noor and Quratulain—demonstrate how gender-based violence cuts across all socio-economic groups and has little to do with the perpetrator’s background.

Noor was killed in the heart of Islamabad, by Zahir Jaffer, a person of affluent background, with abusive tendencies and a drug addiction. We now know that Zahir felt emboldened to kill his longtime friend and partner because his abusive attitude had long been condoned by those around him. Noor became a victim of intimate partner homicide, in a final act of aggression in Zahir’s list of lesser aggressions.

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Quratulain, a mother of four was tortured to death by her husband, Umar Mehmood, in Hyderabad, after he routinely abused her for years. Each time she went to her parents to seek refuge, they encouraged her to go back to her abuser. Quratulain’s death drew attention to the vulnerable status of lower-class women who have no choice but to stay in abusive marriages because of the stigma attached to divorce and the lack of support given by family members.

Quratulain and Noor led very different lives yet suffered the same fate at the hands of their partners. Their murderers also came from entirely different backgrounds yet subscribed to one worldview; that a woman should be the subject of their control. Both men used their privileged position in a patriarchal society to commit crimes against their partner. They benefited from a structure that continues to protect and enable them.

In the wake of Noor’s beheading, the men we know and interact with distanced themselves from this heinous act, condemning it in the strongest of terms and demanding capital punishment for Zahir Jaffer. Yet, a large chunk failed to acknowledge how they are also part of the problem and have contributed to a system whose products are Zahir and Umar. The men in our immediate circles may not be committing violent crimes against the women in their lives but they are certainly, in less overt ways, enabling patriarchy in their households and playing a role in preserving the status quo. They regularly police the choices of the females in their homes and workplaces, place restrictions on their freedoms and often treat them as individuals with little to no agency. Hence, the inability of these men to identify their male entitlement and work on their own shortcomings makes their cries for justice for Noor and Quratulain seem a little hollow.

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Screaming slogans of justice for Noor appear insincere when you, as a man, respond to her murder by imposing greater regulations on the women around you. It feels wrong for you to demand that her killer be hanged while no effort is made to unlearn the toxic masculinity you exhibit towards the women in your life.

In the face of an increasingly anti-women social environment, let’s not forget the utterly irresponsible statements made by the man running the country. Pakistan ranks as the sixth most dangerous country in the world for women. At a time when there should be a concerted effort to deal with the rise in crimes, the rejection of the domestic violence bill which proposed stringent punishment against the perpetrators of gender-based violence, indicates how non-seriously PM Imran takes the plight of Pakistani women. On the contrary, the premier has made victim-blaming remarks and attributed Western media influence as the cause of increase in cases of sexual offences. His flawed view that male exposure to ‘women in few clothes’ is corrupting male minds, has done and will continue to do great damage to Pakistani women.

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While we have social media to thank for bringing to light these recent tragedies, we also have these platforms to show us what our Prime Minister is busy doing while the women are being butchered. The PM is planting trees in Nathiagali and until two days ago did not care to make an official statement about the rising rate of femicides. The façade of Naya Pakistan has been shred to pieces over the last three years, and anyone who still believes things will get better under PM Imran’s watch is now fooling themselves.

However, examining the progress in Noor’s case, such as the extension of the culprit’s remand, the arrest of his parents, and the general manner in which the case is being handled seems to spark a glimmer of hope. Unlike the past, the action taken by the law enforcement personnel in Noor’s murder case has been swift and strict. We hope the same sort of action for Quratulain’s culprit and hope that this changes the way femicides are handled in Pakistan. If justice is truly served, both Zahir and Umar will pay deeply for the pain they have inflicted on their victims and their families.