[Salaar Khan](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/salaar-khan)

June 24, 2021

**Reductio ad Robot**

It was bad enough that he said it the first time. It is worse, yet, that after so many months where he might have attempted to understand the other perspective, he’s only doubled down. And it’s worse, still, that every time he presents this pet thesis, an entire ensemble snaps into motion to tell us that his words were taken out of context, but also entirely true.

As to context, it is true that the longer version adds some depth that the HBO-cut so obviously lacked. But the fundamentals remain unchanged. And a lot of it was much better left out.

In the director’s cut, Imran Khan cites the unfortunate reality that the vast majority of sexual crimes are never reported. In fact, he claims that barely one percent of sexual crimes are reported. It’s unclear where he gets that statistic (given that, to date, public-private attempts to calculate such estimates have been stillborn). But, in any case, the question related to rape in particular, and not all sex crimes.

Going by unofficial estimates, a Geo News investigation from last year collected statistics from the police; the Law and Justice Commission; the HRCP; the Women’s Foundation and provincial welfare agencies. It estimated that around 41 percent of rapes are reported. To be sure, this is abysmal. Even this estimate means that more rapes are unreported than reported. But it isn’t the one percent that supposedly applies to the reporting of all sex crimes.

This matters because the ‘barely one percent reported’ thinking is foundational to the prime minister’s conclusion. For him, the argument goes, “Law enforcement can only deal with less than one percent. The rest, the society has to deal with.” In so many words: unless more women (are able to) report rape, there’s only so much the state can do. But since we all still want fewer instances of rape, society, itself, will have to step up.

There are at least three things wrong with that line of thinking. First, as you can imagine, that argument loses considerable thrust when that one percent is multiplied by forty-one.

Second, rape isn’t the only underreported crime we know of. Domestic violence is another crime where underreporting is endemic. Surely our state-solution to that isn’t mixed martial arts training to ensure women are more difficult targets.

Third, Pakistan is hardly the only country in the world where rape is underreported; rape is the most underreported violent crime across the world. Why not think more about increasing reporting? Especially as this government, itself, happens to be doing that. In July of this year, Pakistan will finally have a national ‘911’ number. But there is so much more that needs to be done. There’s little incentive to report if only three percent of cases result in actual convictions. Lifting that number will require a procedural overhaul that has many more moving parts than “law enforcement” and “the rest of society”.

As it turns out, the ‘rest of society’ that will have to step in, is basically women. And stepping up basically means layering up. If women don’t do this, the National Temptation Index can’t help but go up. And the state can’t protect them any further if they can’t at least try to protect themselves.

To give it its due (or what he seems to think is its due), the prime minister might present at least three defences to this formulation. First, he didn’t just say women. In fact he, twice, attempted to complete a sentence involving various professions and the word ‘awareness’. If the argument was that all sectors of society be educated, and then educate, he was spot on. But while he is right in arguing we need more ‘awareness’, his stream-of-consciousness hunches are precisely the problem.

Second, he says what he was referring to was the ‘concept’ of purdah, not purdah itself. The concept, he insists, is thicker than cloth. But that matters little if the execution of that concept must be borne solely by women (with a side-order of depriving kids of all genders of their iPhones).

Third, he might say he didn’t suggest women’s clothing was the only factor that needed to be controlled – just one of several. Not only is this true, but this is a part that the HBO edit obscures. And, importantly, this wasn’t like the first time where he decided that an address to the nation about a gruesome rape was the right opportunity to discuss women’s clothing. He was specifically asked about his views on the role of women’s clothing. But, given a chance to clarify his previous views, it was clear that they hadn’t changed.

Unfortunately, now, as then, Imran Khan’s answer continues to be based on what he insists is ‘common sense’. Even as he insists on the importance of awareness, months after he last made these claims, he does not seem to have made any effort to make himself any more ‘aware’.

To be clear, no one is suggesting that a woman’s clothing never affects the risk of her being sexually assaulted (as deliberately distinguished from blameworthiness). But the role that clothing plays is vastly overplayed. If it’s all a matter of proportion, consider the fact that some 82 percent of rapists in Pakistan are close relatives. Unless the implication is that women should remain vigilant even in their own homes, then even if his argument were to hold, it would apply to only 18 percent of all cases. This also means that while there are, indeed, religious injunctions on clothing and such, these too wouldn’t materially change the reality of rape in Pakistan.

Consider the repeated rapes of animals and corpses – where neither hooves nor coffins are adequate deterrents. Consider the rape of victims of war, or rape as a means to settle feuds between rival families. Consider the fact that most rapists can’t even recall what their victims were wearing. Or better yet, consider research indicating that this view might be at complete odds with reality – where the non-verbal cues that rapists scan for in their victims place ‘submissiveness’ higher than “conventional definitions of physical attractiveness”. Consider that, because rapists see revealing clothing as a sign of self-confidence, the research suggests that more layers and baggy clothing may, in fact, increase the likelihood of rape.

That may seem counterintuitive, but we should all hope that to be the case, anyway. Why is the assumption that these are questions that can be answered through ‘common sense’? Why do we assume the existence of some invisible line that moves forwards and backwards in society, turning ordinary people into rapists as it crosses them? Why, at a state level, do we assume the ordinary person to be a potential psychopath, and then go about formulating national narratives around that assumption?

The view that the prime minister keeps pushing is just lollipop-analogy logic at the state level – where women are reduced to pieces of hard candy, and men are reduced to unthinking animals with nothing to prevent them from temptation other than a thin film of plastic. Why is the assumption that in the absence of discos, ordinary people become more likely to become rapists? How is that to be reconciled with the considerable proportion of rapists who aren’t starved of intimacy and, in fact, have stable sexual partners? How do we go from scanty clothing having “an effect” on society to determining that that effect will be more rape?

But, of course, when research is provided to the contrary, the reflex is that the research comes from a different context. You can’t just take the Western experience and impose it here. Cultural imperialism. But the premise for the whole argument is that Hollywood has destroyed Western society (and taken Bollywood and India down with it), and that it will do the same to us. Why does the Western experience apply only when convenient? You can’t have it both ways. Also, how do we go from more access to Hollywood to rising rape, anyway? While it is enough for him to say, “clearly it has an effect on society”, he hasn’t once attempted to demonstrate that this is a case of causation, and not mere correlation.

I personally couldn’t care less what Johnathan from Axios thinks of our prime minister’s words. But I do worry about all the Pakistani men whose boys-will-be-boys thinking it validates. And all the Pakistani women for whom this is just another reminder that they’re really on their own here. And that no amount of chemical castration-enabling legislation will change the fundamentals of that.

And to be clear, this isn’t about politics. There are easier ways to score petty political points than to write thousand-word op-eds. Few thinking people genuinely want to believe that their prime minister thinks like this. Because, at the end of the day, there’s only one group of people that really benefits from having a state that isn’t willing to understand a woman’s perspective on this: rapists.

Unless that is a conclusion the prime minister is willing to accept, he must do better.

The writer is a lawyer.

Email: salaar.khan@columbia.edu

Twitter: @brainmasalaar