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**SGBV and the police**

Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) cases have been rapidly rising at an alarming rate in Pakistan, a country that ranks as the sixth most dangerous country in the world for women.

However, a significant number of cases remain unreported and so a vast majority of perpetrators go unpunished and continue inflicting violence on women and children with increased levels of atrocity. The rapidly escalating cases cannot be adequately addressed without taking research-based concrete actions aimed at improving the Criminal Justice System (CJS) in order to make the country safe for women and children.

The police force is usually the first responder to SGBV in the CJS. However, often, the police force does not respond in an efficient, fair and sensitive manner. As a result, the recent surge in the hashtags for justice for victims/survivors of SGBV highlights that often survivors are forced to share their plight on social media for access to justice rather than reporting it to the police.

Individuals reporting SGBV require sensitivity and support, but often face inconsiderate and agonizing attitudes from police officers, including re-victimization. As a result, there is a deep-rooted mistrust in the policing system in Pakistan as the public does not have faith in the police force, which contributes to the underreporting of SGBV crimes as individuals give up on reporting incidents to police. This is why many SGBV crimes remain intractable or are diverted and reported as cases of trespass or robbery, etc.

Although social and cultural constraints act as significant deterrents that hinder individuals from reporting the SGBV perpetrated against them, the distrust and fear of police force massively hinders them from coming forward to report the crimes. For example, as per the latest ‘Crime figures of Sindh Province for the Year-2020’ revealed by the Sindh Police, only one gang rape case was reported in the Sukkur range. From these statistics, it can be inferred that there is a massive lack of trust in the police, due to which offenders escape the CJS and do not face the consequences of their actions. Therefore, the severity and heinousness of their crimes increases. For example, it has been reported by various credible news sources that the offender in the motorway gang-rape case, Abid Ali was a serial rapist, who had escaped the CJS each time, until he committed a crime so horrific and gruesome that it shook the entire nation.

It is important to highlight that most of the factors that contribute towards the fear and distrust of police by the public also arises due to a lack of gender sensitization training and awareness/ education regarding the real motives and causes behind crimes of sexual violence and a belief in rape myths. One cannot forget the insensitive remarks of the former Lahore CCPO blaming the survivor of the motorway gang-rape; and later PM Imran Khan’s remarks on live television, where he linked rape to how a woman dresses. In a recent interview with Jonathan Swan of Axios HBO, the prime minister once again blamed the rise in sexual violence on women wearing “very few clothes”. This reflects the mindset of a large segment of society that prefers to blame the survivor. However, such a mindset cannot be allowed to prevail in the police force at any cost.

On the other hand, the lack of efficient responses by the police often arises due to low wages and prolonged working hours along with the lack of an adequate operational budget and supervision. The prolonged working hours create frustration, unprofessionalism and a lack of motivation among the police force whereas bribes are taken in order to supplement income. It is important to emphasize that inefficient responses to reports of SGBV cannot be tolerated or justified at any cost, but in order to bring reforms, it is important to highlight that better wages, working hours and conditions along with strictly enforced standard operating procedures for the police officials are the need of the hour.

In the 2020 study titled, ‘A Study of Economic, Cultural, and Political Causes of Police Corruption in Pakistan’, by Nadeem Malik and Tariq Abbas Qureshi, it was revealed that police officers are supposed to be on duty for 16–18 hours without any extra remuneration, each week, without any regular duty rosters in operation. A junior officer interviewed during the study disclosed: “prolonged work hours and low salaries cause enormous stress and depression among officers”. Moreover the report stated, “It is almost as though we forget law-enforcement personnel are also living, breathing human beings with emotions, trauma and resentment that build up within them”. The study emphasized how, “the lack of provision of adequate wages… deteriorates the quality of work, productivity, and morale.”

In order to encourage the survivors/victims of sexual violence to report the crimes to the police force and bringing reforms within the institution, six recommendations are suggested. First, police officers dealing with cases of SGBV should undergo gender-sensitization training. Second, the recent nomination of IOs for the establishment and training of specialized team units in cases of gender based violence in Sindh is a welcome step that is needed across the country.

Third, a gender protection unit, similar to the one in Islamabad, comprising trained female police staff, medical officers as well as legal advisors who can provide assistance to the affected women and children, should be established in every city. Fourth, better wages, working hours and working environment should be provided to all police officials. Fifth, the government should bring initiatives in order to improve the public image of the police force. Sixth, police officials should be held accountable when they fail to perform their duties diligently.

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