

# The curse of honour killing

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TWO men brandishing guns forced their way into a village home along the Indus. Within minutes, they had shot dead two young women who stood terrified before being gunned down. This gruesome homicidal act may appear to be the consequence of a long-standing tribal feud or even one involving a notorious dacoit (such occurrences being a common feature). However, closer examination reveals that this bore all the hallmarks of "honour killing" - a tribal custom that claims many lives each year throughout the country.

In another incident that took place in a remote village of Punjab, a young girl of 16 years was observed by her family to be giving looks to a young neighbour. Her brother came into her room and dragged her into the street. In front of many onlookers he poured kerosene over her and set her alight. Nobody came forward to stop that barbaric act. She did not die easily, but slowly in unimaginable agony. Her charred body lay in the street for hours before it was removed. According to her brother, she had been having illicit relations with her neighbour and had brought dishonour to the whole family.

What was the fault of those young girls? In the first case, the girls had refused to get married to old men in lieu of money owed by the family. In the

many men to accuse their mothers, sisters, wives or female relatives of dishonouring their families, and consequently, killing them in order to extract compensation from the "karo", the alleged paramour, if he does not want to die. A man in a village near Larkana is reported to have killed his 70-year-old mother as a "kari" and obtained Rs. 20,000 from the man declared as "karo."

Despite the government's resolve to curb this practice - its efforts have seen the presentation of a bill on the subject in parliament - honour killings show no abatement. The number of incidents is actually higher than the cases reported as people have little faith in the fairness of the criminal justice system. In spite of it being cold-blooded murder, committed with brutality and scant regard for religion or law, honour killing continues to be regarded more as a custom rather than crime. The law enforcement agencies

or at least minimize gender bias in the law. Amendments in the Qisas and Diyat Ordinance are the need of the hour. It would be better still if it is repealed altogether to remove confusion. The government should adopt legislation outlawing all forms of violence against women, including domestic violence, women trafficking, and the giving of women in marriage against financial consideration or as a form of compensation.

It is the government's responsibility to ensure that all its subordinate law enforcement departments take prompt notice of "honour killing" cases and investigate them impartially. The culprits should be brought to book and tried under the law. Where the complainant is not willing to come forward, the cases should be registered on behalf of the state. The government should undertake a series of wide ranging public awareness programmes through the media, the education system and public

If honour killing is to be eliminated, the government should take it upon itself to develop a violence-free culture by restraining its citizens from taking the law into their own hands. This cannot be achieved unless the rule of law is rigidly enforced, and measures are carried out to reduce gender bias in society by sensitizing the police and making it aware of its responsibilities.

announcements informing both men and women of their equal rights and for the prevention of gender violence. The state should bring together human rights activists, lawyers and women's rights groups and assist them in pursuing their legitimate activities without harassment.

Victim support services provided by the state or the NGOs should be strengthened and expanded. They should be run as places of voluntary recourse for women and their purpose should be protective providing protection to the public and private run shelters for women. There is a need to change the ethos and culture of government organizations dealing with these sensitive gender issues. If the state has to

second, mere suspicion was enough. In both incidents, real brothers carried out the killings without any remorse.

In Pakistan's rural areas, women live in fear, and violence against them is a norm rather than an exception. The all-encompassing term "honour" has acquired notoriety and is now equated with the "sanction to kill" those viewed as having illicit affairs, and consequently, dishonouring their families. The perception among the people in the rural areas in general and Baloch tribes in particular is that the honour of a family is dependent on a woman's virginity. It is believed this is the property of the men around her, first her father's, and later a gift to her husband.

In this context, a woman's honour must be guarded by a community of male family members to ensure that she does not lose it and bring shame to the family name. Any transgression almost immediately results in a crime of honour.

Monetary gain has motivated

and the courts also seem to endorse this view by their conduct.

It is the government's responsibility to prevent its citizens from taking the law into their own hands and developing a violence-free culture in society. This cannot be achieved unless the rule of law is rigidly enforced. No person should be allowed to circumvent the process of law, and everyone should be accountable in the eyes of law without any discrimination. Gender bias, which is pervasive, must be eradicated, particularly from the police. Efforts must be made to sensitize the police towards its lawful obligations. In this respect there is an urgent need to undertake measures for training, and recruitment of lady officers and the extensive use of forensic facilities.

The government must fulfil its obligations to the international community by ending parallel justice systems affecting the rights of women. It must also take concrete steps to eradicate

issues. If the state has to show any respect for human dignity and the international covenants it has signed, then, it will have to address the issue more seriously. There is an urgent need to revisit the issue in its totality.

The Qisas and Diyat Ordinance, which is especially discriminatory towards women should be re-examined. The focus of these laws is not so much on justice, as it is on punishment. It calls for a research on Muslim societies which should address the problems, specifically women empowerment; the problem of the status of women in specific geographical locations and historical periods; dealing with issues such as women's labour force participation, education, democratic behaviour and political activity.

Honour killings is an issue that forces us into a great deal of introspection and urges us to ask whether legislators, religious leaders, philosophers, social scientists, researchers and state administrators have failed women.