

# Tackling domestic violence

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THE same day when Mukhtar Mai filed an appeal in the Supreme Court against the acquittal of her alleged rapists by the Multan bench of the Lahore High Court, this paper carried a report of the Progressive Women's Association (PWA), an Islamabad-based NGO, that 7,000 burn cases involving women were brought to only four hospitals in Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

The report didn't specify the period in which these incidents of violence took place. Mukhtar Mai's anguish is too recent for it to have been erased from people's collective memory. She is the woman who was gangraped in 2002 in Meerwala village on the orders of a jirga.

And as long as men and women of conscience are alive, Mukhtar Mai will not find herself alone. Only recently an American woman, Benita Lubic, wrote to me, "I want you to know that we do care! I was most distressed reading an article in the *Washington Post* about Mukhtar Mai and the terrible problems she has had to face and the fight she has against her alleged rapists. My heart goes out to her and others who experience similar situations. I pray for her."

Mukhtar Mai's case received worldwide publicity, given the brutal nature of the incident and how adversely it reflected on the power structure of the state and society in Pakistan. But there are many other women who are victims of domestic violence on a daily basis and not much is heard about their agony. For the fact is that domestic violence is on the rise in this country. It comes into public notice only when the woman is killed or seriously injured. Otherwise domestic violence is hidden behind a veil of secrecy and it remains within the four walls of the home.

duced many flyers and leaflets on the subject, highlighting the root cause of abuse being the man's desire to have complete control and power over the wife. This may take many forms, such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, economic abuse and sexual abuse.

While the Canadian government is quite focused on women's rights and the preservation of the family, the Pakistan government has regrettably not been so attentive to the rights of women. Mercifully, many Pakistani NGOs, such as the Aurat Foundation, have addressed this issue and produced similar literature on violence against women. True its impact has been limited because of the low rate of literacy in the country.

What is, however, more important is that the second prong of the strategy should be addressed simultaneously — one that seeks to help a woman and her family to get out of an abusive situation without taking the extreme measure of breaking up the family. Nothing of significance seems to have been done in this area. Shelters, which take in battered women, are essential but are not the ultimate solution. They provide temporary respite to a woman but, in the end, she is expected to seek legal redress and stand up on her own feet if she does not wish to go back to her husband and the abusive situation. Hence shelters are designed for extreme cases of violence when a woman's life may actually be in danger.

A troubled family should also be provided a via media, that is, the option to change the abusive situation. In Canada, the government and the NGOs have set up round-the-clock helplines to allow a woman in distress to call and receive emotional support, crisis counselling, referrals for

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struggled to make it a culpable crime so that the police can register a case against a man who beats his wife or seeks to hurt her in any other way. But so far not much has been achieved because a woman continues to be looked upon as her husband's property to be bullied and bandied about as he wishes. When she complains — women's police stations were set up supposedly to provide such women succour — she is advised to go home and bear it. That is how it has been going on for generations she is told and the family honour is at stake.

The chairperson of the PWA complained against the women parliamentarians who, she said, had failed to play an effective role in preventing violence against women. While the law has to be tightened to legally restrain a person from beating or abusing his wife, a man who physically assaults his wife — burns her, throws acid on her face or causes grave bodily injury — can be hauled up under the existing laws. Yet cases are not registered as the PWA confirms.

According to the staff of a woman's shelter in Karachi (Pannah), the perpetrators of domestic violence in Pakistan, however, are not only husbands but also the in-laws, parents and male relatives. Women are unable to cope with this culture of violence on their own and often endure it to prevent the breakup of the family. It is surprising that women activists have not done enough to preempt domestic violence.

Mobina Bhimani, an East-African born Canadian development activist who has worked for several years in Pakistan, points out that the struggle for women's rights, especially to protect them against violence in the home, should not be directed at breaking up the family. "The woman has to be made aware about her rights to be safe and that violence against women is a crime," Mobina says. But the approach to dealing with domestic violence should not be at the expense of breaking up the home.

In Canada, many NGOs use a two-pronged strategy to deal with wife abuse. The first one is to educate society and create awareness about what is abuse and inculcate zero-tolerance for it. Ontario's government has pro-

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shelters, legal services, housing and financial assistance. The abusing man can also call the helpline for assistance. The only helpline that seems to be working here is the police's "madadgar" but that is more an emergency centre to report crimes and obtain assistance against car snatching, house-breaking and kidnapping attempts. It is not designed to offer emotional support.

Another essential need is for counselling units where trained social workers and psychologists can talk to the family and reorient their thinking in finding constructive solutions to domestic disputes without using violence. It calls for a change in the culture vis-a-vis woman and her marital rights within the family and marriage. In fact, many casualties can be averted through family-counselling because it is known that the extreme cases of family violence do not occur out of the blue. They are preceded by a long history of chronic tension and conflict. Counselling and intervention at this stage can prove to be a positive measure.

Many of these services can be provided through community centres that should be set up in every locality. NGOs can set up helplines and provide assistance where their resources allow. By networking with each other, these NGOs can expand their reach without creating unnecessary duplication. As a number of NGOs working in the field of population have shown, a communication strategy based on direct person-to-person contact works better in our society where the majority of the women and a large chunk of the men are illiterate.