

Violence within the four walls

Human Rights
Daily 30/6/05

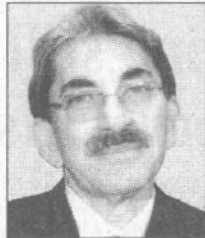
NUSRAT WAS BROUGHT TO THE clinic by her parents. She was a fairly beautiful young woman in her mid-30s. She had been married for about 10 years to Zulfiqar, a businessman, and had three children, a boy and two girls. She had graduated from one of the top educational institutions of the city. She and her husband lived by themselves in a nuclear family setup, in a house that he had built some five years ago.

Nusrat's parents lived in a different city. She had no close family member living near her. Some years ago her husband had borrowed some money from the bank, a part of which he invested in his business; building the house with the rest on land that he inherited from his father. But soon after the couple moved into the new house, it had all started. Zulfiqar first became irritable, then angry, and finally aggressive towards Nusrat.

His pet accusation was that she had failed to deliver boys as he desired and had given birth to two girls. Using that as an excuse, Zulfiqar would fly into tempers at the slightest disagreement. He repeatedly beat her. Though he began with an occasional slap, he gradually increased the physical violence until his aggression took the shape of serious assaults. Her parents initially thought that such occurrences might be a transitory episode that some marriages experience.

But when Zulfiqar's excessive outbursts became persistent and life threatening, they got worried. A day before she was brought for consultation, he beat her severely after which she called her parents for help. They arrived hurriedly and after listening to her story, concluded that she had failed to control and manage her

PSYCHOLOGY



HUMAIR HASHMI

When Nusrat came for consultation, she had a black eye, a bandaged eyebrow that had needed three surgical stitches. Her lips were blue and bruised and a front tooth was chipped. She appeared pale and frightened — a textbook picture of a battered wife

husband. And that was when professional intervention was sought. When she came for consultation, she had a black eye, a bandaged eyebrow that had needed three surgical stitches. Her lips were blue and bruised and a front tooth was chipped. She appeared pale and frightened — a textbook picture of a battered wife.

Wife battering is perhaps as old as recorded history and has continued unabated up to

the present. It had however not been recognised as a problem worthy of serious thought and civilised response even up to the middle of the nineteenth century. It was only after 1850 that feminists in Europe and North America started campaigning to end violence against wives and beloveds. Even up to the end of 19th century, such efforts received little public sympathy and support.

It was in the middle of twentieth century that violence against wives, and women in general, started to come into focus. By the 1980s, wife/beloved battering was recognised as a social problem in the developed countries. Recent research shows that 3.8 percent wives are severely beaten up in America; the figures may be similar for Europe. These may however be much higher for Pakistan.

In Pakistan, thanks to the work by some NGOs, violence against women, particularly wife battering, is now publicly acknowledged as a societal menace. It is because of the tireless efforts of fearless women associated with these NGOs that the general public and the state now recognise the existence of wife battering. What took the West over a hundred years to acknowledge, Pakistan has achieved in less time.

Violence against women in general, and wife battering in particular, can be looked at from three angles; the first angle is the socio-cultural-economic paradigm in a society; the second is the psychodynamics of the husband/lover/man who is the perpetrator of violence; and the third is the psychological-cognitive structure of the wife/ beloved/woman.

In regard to the first, researchers have shown that women's economic dependence relegates them to a lower position of existence in

society. The figures of US Department of Justice, for example, show that women in the US earn only 58 percent of what men with the same qualifications and experience are paid. United Nations' figures, on the other hand, reveal that worldwide women earn 30 percent less than men when both are equally qualified and experienced. These figures pertain to working women. Employment figures are also heavily skewed in favour of men. Employment figures worldwide show that much more men are gainfully employed in the market than women.

Women are economically dependent on men because they are not employed in the conventional, market sense; and even when they are, they earn far less than men. This gender-related economic disparity is worldwide. Women's lack of economic independence is the major predisposing factor that relegates women to a lower position in society and family, rendering them weak and vulnerable — an easy target for violence by men.

The patriarchal order of society is also a predisposing factor for violence against women particularly wife battering. A patriarchal society assigns a secondary status to women and provides men with the ultimate authority over women; men can treat women the way they want. And when these patriarchal beliefs and practices are given religious sanction by certain sections of the society, divine justification is added to the belief and its emergent horrific practices.

Names have been changed to protect identities. This is the first of a two-part series. Humair Hashmi is a consulting psychologist, who teaches at Imperial College