**Unsafe streets**

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Rising crime in Pakistan seems to be threatening the social fabric of Pakistani society. Some argue that while street crimes get more attention in the media, other crimes remain ignored.

For instance, gender-based crimes are not given due importance, and not many media outlets follow up on such stories. Punjab seems to be witnessing a steady increase in such crimes. The recent killing of a woman in Toba Tek Singh by her brother speaks volumes about this cancerous patriarchy. This incident uncovers the deep contempt of our male-dominated society towards women. The fact that the woman was strangled in the presence of her father indicates that the fear of the law is almost non-existent among such people.

Our authorities have this naive belief that by curbing events like the annual Aurat March, such gender-based crimes will somehow wither away, not realizing that patriarchal values keep expanding across the country and those responsible for violence against women feel no hesitation in showing off the impunity they enjoy.

The violence does not stop here. In another incident, a woman was beaten up in the Surjani Town neighbourhood of Karachi for merely stopping land grabbers from encroaching upon her plot. The video of the incident went viral on social media, but no law-enforcement official showed urgency to probe the matter. Again, this is a criminal sense of impunity that encourages criminals to target women.

Similarly, the persecution of minorities is also not considered a big crime. Extremist mobs are roaming around, damaging the places of worship of non-Muslim Pakistanis. Incidents like desecrating the graveyards of minority communities and demolishing their places of worship are rampant in many parts of the country, especially in the most populous province. Such extremist bands also intimidate anyone who dares to speak against them. Minorities claim no arrest has been made in such crimes.

Crimes against children – another vulnerable group – also remain unaddressed. Despite the enactment of several laws to protect children, our kids are still unsafe. Recently, a cleric allegedly sexually assaulted a boy in Punjab. But it was surprising to see the number of people who came out to support him and spin the narrative that since the father of the victim had pardoned the perpetrator, the matter stood resolved.

Such a culture of impunity also discourages police officers who dare to confront these predators. In this case, a local police officer defied all odds and arrested the predator. In a video that has now gone viral on social media, he is shaming the cleric for committing this heinous crime. The release of the perpetrator will now encourage other miscreants.

This is not the first incident. Data compiled by Sahil, an NGO working for the welfare of children, shows that in 2023, at least 11 children were abused every day. In the same year, around 4,213 child abuse cases were reported from all four provinces, as well as Islamabad, Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB).

A gender-divide analysis of the data shows that out of the total reported cases, 2,251 (53 per cent) of victims were girls and 1,962 (47 per cent) were boys. The reported age showed that children were most vulnerable to abuse in the age group of 6-15 years, in which more cases of boys than girls were reported. Even children as young as 0-5 years were sexually abused. The abuser’s category of Cruel Numbers 2023 indicates that acquaintances were still the most involved in child sexual abuse, along with relatives, family members, strangers and women abettors.

While child sexual abuse is rampant in all regions of the country, Punjab has recorded the highest number of such crimes. According to Sahil, 75 per cent of such crimes were reported from Punjab, 13 per cent from Sindh, 7.0 per cent from Islamabad, 3.0 per cent from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), and 2.0 per cent from Balochistan, AJK, and GB.

It is not only these types of crimes that have been playing havoc with the lives of people, but other heinous crimes are also going unpunished, especially street crime in Karachi, which has claimed so many lives during the past 16 years. It is encouraging to see Inspector General of Sindh Ghulam Nabi describing these killings as intolerable, but it is equally disappointing to notice the statement by Law Minister of Sindh Zia Lanjar who trivialized such incidents.

Criminals all over the world are arrested within no time if they are caught on camera, but in Pakistan, this does not seem to be the case. Robbers are openly recording videos of their victims in Ghotki and uploading them on social media, but no action has been taken by law-enforcement agencies against them to date.

It is ordinary citizens everywhere who fall victim to these crimes. In the border areas of Sindh and Punjab, teachers, small shopkeepers, and taxi drivers are being targeted. In Karachi, posh areas are comparatively safe.

Heavy deployment of police and Ranger personnel in areas that are hotspots for crimes could be one of the ways to deter such criminals. Similarly, police coordination with NADRA is important to identify these criminals and arrest them promptly. Local intelligence networks also need to be strengthened. But in addition to this, the police should also be well-equipped to deal with rising crime. They need more training and weapons to be efficient, better salaries, and fixed working hours to strike a healthy work-life balance. Sometimes cops have to work for 12 hours without taking a break. A proper shift system might help.

Finally, no anti-crime campaign can be successful without addressing the underlying socio-economic factors. The country already had a large number of poor; this number must have gone up after the devastating floods of 2022 and the closure of factories across the country owing to the rising cost of doing business.

So, providing employment should be the top priority of the federal and provincial governments if they really want to control street crime. They also need to take some stringent administrative measures to deal with other types of crimes.

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