**A Silent Epidemic**

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In a harrowing incident on September 5, 2023, a school principal was arrested for the alleged shocking rape of 45 women. He employed coercive tactics, including blackmailing, to manipulate these women for his gain. Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident but rather mirrors a distressing event that unfolded in Chiniot, Punjab, in 2021. In that deeply troubling episode, a woman not only endured a heinous assault on her dignity but also faced extortion of her possessions, a painful consequence of blackmailing involving her inappropriate videos.

Despite the presence of laws and support services for survivors, women fall prey to blackmail and victimization due to a critical lack of awareness regarding gender-based violence (GBV), as well as their legal rights and avenues to address this menace (Sabria & Young, 2022). Punjab, a province in Pakistan, offers several helplines and organizations dedicated to addressing GBV.

Helplines like Punjab Commission for Women Helpline (1043) and Punjab Women Protection Authority (1737) stand as pillars of support, providing victims with avenues to report their grievances and seek legal guidance. Moreover, critical support systems have also been established to provide free legal advice and assistance to survivors throughout the legal process. The Punjab Legal Aid Office, AJHS Legal Aid Cell, and Dastak Crisis Center are among such notable organizations committed to helping survivors seek justice and recovery.

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Even if these women possess knowledge about Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and their legal rights, the reporting mechanism for GBV survivors remains excessively convoluted. As per UN Women, due to the intricate nature of reporting GBV cases to the police, an abysmally low percentage-only 2 to 3 per cent of women-seek assistance through this channel. However, utilizing resources such as the IG Punjab Helpline (1787), the Women Safety App by Punjab Safe City Authority, or the Zainab Alert App can facilitate not only the ease of FIR registration but also expedite the journey towards justice.

The ramifications of gender-based violence are far-reaching, inflicting a heavy burden on law enforcement and welfare agencies while deeply affecting the physical and mental well-being of survivors. It is imperative to bridge the knowledge gap regarding available support systems and organizations combatting GBV. Awareness empowers not only individuals but also entire communities to shield lives and honour from the insidious grasp of gender-based violence.

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