**Depp v. Heard: A step back**

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Domestic violence against men exists but domestic violence against women persists. Step back for a second and think about how many men do you personally know who have been a victim of domestic violence. Now think about the women you personally know who have been a victim of domestic violence. Domestic violence, often used synonymously with Intimate Partner Violence is one of the least reported crimes globally. Pakistan itself suffers not only from a persistent epidemic of domestic violence but also honour killings, dowry killings and acid attacks concurrently. According to a WHO publication from 2021, 1 in 3 women have been a victim of domestic violence in their lifetime. So why is Depp’s case relevant when it comes to violence against women in South Asia? This region suffers from an alarming rate of domestic violence due to the misogynistic society, twisted religious views and patriarchal family dynamics. Violence against women, especially when committed by a husband, brother or father is rarely reported or prosecuted, even the police tend to refuse to intervene in several cases deeming it as a “family matter” and instead encourage the victim to compromise and retract her statement against the perpetrator.
The sort of media reporting and public reaction that has been witnessed in the Depp case is alarming, women who were already scared to report violence that they experience at the hands of their partners are even more afraid after seeing how people around them and people on the internet villainised Amber Heard way before the jury even reached a verdict. The trial was highly publicised on social media, especially on TikTok, where fans of Depp had already given their verdict and had labelled him as a victim. Depp might have won the case in the US, but it is imperative to remember that this was a defamation case and not a domestic violence case. Defamation laws, since the beginning of their existence, have been weaponised to invalidate and silence women who have dared to speak up against their abusers, harassers and rapists especially those who are powerful public figures.
In a majority of cases surrounding GBV, an unequal power dynamic can be witnessed, and this dynamic is often used to silence the victim, discourage or threaten the victim to refrain from reporting or use their financial power to hire the best legal team, employ the best PR team and turn the victim into an abuser in the public eye. Tactics such as DARVO are mostly used in such cases not only by the perpetrators themselves but also their legal and PR teams. DARVO, is an acronym for Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender, a tactic in which the actual perpetrator puts on the robe of “falsely accused” and paints the actual victim as a manipulative perpetrator who has little or no credibility. When talking about the Depp v. Heard case, it is imperative to remember that Depp might have won this case in the US, but in the UK it was found that 12 incidents of domestic violence had occurred at the hands of Depp, and whatever was published in The Sun was “substantially true”. Keeping in mind that the case in the UK was decided by Justice Andrew Nicol, a judge, well read in law and solely focused on evidence, as opposed to the case in the US which was decided by a jury, which is easier to manipulate by the use of DARVO.
Victim blaming and the trivialisation of violence against women has existed since a long time, especially in cases of rape where even judges have seen to question women as to why they were dressed a certain way or why they went to that place or why they had so much to drink instead of questioning the perpetrator as to why he committed this heinous act of violence. The ‘lying woman’ is a much more attractive story to sell instead of the ‘wife beater’ to discredit survivors. In fact, almost non-existent public outrage will be witnessed unless the woman has been raped and killed in the most brutal way possible. If instead she survives and manages to tell what happened to her, she’s subjected to the most vicious form of victim blaming. Even in the most brutal cases such as Nirbhaya gang rape in India and the vicious beheading of Noor Muqqadam by Zahir Jaffar, people still engaged in victim blaming and questioned why these women left their house, in an attempt to shift the blame on the victim. Why is it that we only believe that someone is a real victim only when he or she looks visibly battered and shattered or only when she is killed brutally? Victims of abuse can look, react and respond in extremely different ways. It is imperative to remember that the perfect victim doesn’t exist.