**Ordinary killings...**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2021-02-17

A COUPLE of weeks ago a man named Shakil a resident of Sheikhupura had an argument with his family members. When his mother intervened, the man grew even angrier and more agitated at the women in his family. In the ensuing moments, he became more ferocious until eventually he took out a firearm and shot his mother, and three other women f amily members including his wife. All four women perished. Shakil himself managed to escape. The story was reported when the crime occurred but few details are available about the progress of the case.  
  
Around the same time in Nepal, a 17-year-old schoolgirl named Bhagirathi Bhatta was returning home from school. Afternoon became evening and her worried parents eventually went to the police to report that their daughter was yet to return home. Eventually, Bhagirathi`s body was recovered in a gorge near her village. The police said that they were questioning suspects but there seemed to be little information about who the suspects were or who would have committed such a crime.  
  
This past weekend, women`s groups staged a mock funeralin the streets of Kathmandu, in which they carried a young girl through the streets to highlight what happened to Bhagirathi and the lack of justice in her case.  
  
These are examples of just a few women recently killed in South Asia. Like Pakistan and Nepal, India and Bangladesh are also not safe places for women. In India, the 2012 gang rape of a young woman in a bus in New Delhi led to a debate on the constant threat and danger that Indian women f ace for the crime of being women. The case garnered international attention and some legal initiatives were undertaken but it is questionable whether the environment is any safer for women than it used to be.  
  
Two years af ter the Delhi gang rape, another sad incident occurred in a village of Uttar Pradesh. In that case, two girls from the village of Katra near the Nepalese border were found murdered with their bodies hanging f rom a mango tree in the families` orchard. The girls were only 14 and 16 yearsold and the deaths seemed to be motivated in part by so-called `honour`. An investigation was launched into the case, which owing to the f act that it took place only two years after the Delhi gang rape, led to calls that nothing had changed in terms of safety for women.  
  
Now, an Indian journalist named Sonia Paleiro has written a book that focuses on the Katra case.  
  
T he book titled The Good Girls: An Ordinary Killing details Faleiro`s six-year-long investigation into the case as she made trip after trip to the village of Katra to speak to the girls` families, perused thousands of pages of investigatory records and inter-viewed hundreds of people. The result is a look at why cases such as that of the girls of Katra in particular and we can extend this to the women of Sheikhupura or the schoolgirls of Kathmandu are so dif ficult to solve and the truth of what happened so difficult to excavate.  
  
In a recent interview, Faleiro provided interesting insights; the girls were very well-loved by their families who wanted very much to know what had happened. Finding out the `truth` was complicated in part because the communal glue that allows South Asian society to function also ensures that emphasis is on the community rather than the individual. Simply put, living amid extreme poverty complicated by the lack of opportunity means that the community one lives in is one`s best bet for survival, an insurance scheme for the poorest of the world.  
  
The survival of the community in turn requires that each of its members is policed by all othermembers of the community such that they are behaving in accordance with the rules and strictures that have been set. Anyone who steps out of line must be swiftly and severely punished, because if they are not, others in the community might similarly rebel and thus endanger the group.  
  
This means that when outside investigators or journalists or anyone else try to unearth the truth about crimes that may have occurred they run into a wall of silence.  
  
When survival depends on the community, the idea of individual choice or action is in contravention of the survival of the whole. Individual actions carried out only for one`s own satisfaction are unavailable to women, who are the most vulnerable in the community. In the poorest communities of South Asia, they are also unavailable to men.  
  
Everyone is trapped in a communal life of endless policing and fear-driven conformity.  
  
The great irony of all this is that even as everyone born in South Asia is trained to be a police officer, required to carry out the task of watching and policing everyone else around them, ensuring that they stay in line or risk public shaming, actual crimes, particularly those involving women, are rarely solved.  
  
In Pakistan, the situation is no different. The actual details of crimes against women are rarely known a lack of resources on the part of everyone from the underpaid police of ficials to the overworked lawyers and the arbitrary judges all create a framework that can only provide the pretence of a legal system rather than an actual one. In a vicious circle, the less the system works the stronger the argument for relying even more on the sustaining tribe or community. In the meantime, the endless procession of women who have perished continues, counting death after death; all of them ordinary killings, the kind that will continue to happen again and again and again.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.  
  
rafia.zakaria@gmail.com