**Predators in homes**

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Tuesday, Oct 11, 2022

The much-purported concept in our society of women being safe within the four walls of a house is and has always been elusive.

If anything, the recent murder of Sarah Inam, like the countless other murders of women by intimate partners in our country, attests to that.

But can we be surprised at the incidence of such crimes when society continues to blame women, and the accused almost always escape scot-free?

Several factors at the state, societal and family level deserve contemplation. At the state level, the loops in our criminal justice system have emboldened criminals particularly involved in the murder of women and girls to escape with, if at all any, minimal punishment.

Societal norms and attitudes towards women and girls are at the heart of this callousness. Our society devalues women and girls, which explains the permissiveness and acceptance of violence against women and girls (VAWG) by men. Also, the fact that girls are always viewed as someone else’s responsibility, first the fathers and brothers and later as the husbands. This ‘otherness’ of girls is what discourages society from speaking up in matters of VAWG as it is seen as a personal issue to the family.

Girls are treated as the ‘other’ since birth. A baby girl’s birth is never celebrated as jubilantly as that of a boy, and she’s raised to be a perfect fit for society’s criterion of what constitutes a perfect girl. Boys, on the other hand, are raised to be as difficult as possible, putting the burden of accepting or taming them on other girls.

Let’s look at some stats now. Well, not surprisingly we fare very poorly on all global indices related to gender equality, including the WEF’s Global Gender Gap Index which ranks us second lowest out of 156 countries.

Moreover, around 28 per cent of women between the ages of 15 and 29 have experienced physical violence according to the Demographic and Health Survey 2017. According to Aurat Foundation, 2,297 cases of violence against women were registered in four provinces in 2021. These violent incidents involved murder, abduction, kidnapping, rape and gang rape, honour killings and domestic abuse. The actual figure could be higher as many cases of VAWG remain unreported.

For cases that do make it to the court, it can take years for the victims, particularly those from lower income backgrounds, to fight against the judicial system.

The conviction rate for cases involving violence against women is abysmally low at only 1-2.5 per cent according to a UNFPA report. Despite the closure of a major legal loophole that allowed perpetrators of honour killings to seek forgiveness from the victim’s family to escape punishment, out-of-court settlements still allow many perpetrators to escape without the slightest sentence. Victim-blaming and shaming also discourages women from reporting crimes committed against them by men, like in the case of the motorway gang rape of a woman whose timing for travelling was questioned by many.

As the fifth most populous country in the world with 49 per cent of the population made up of women, only about 20 per cent are in formal employment. The literacy rate for females stands at about 46 per cent compared to about 69 per cent for men, showing slight but erratic improvement from previous years. The maternal mortality ratio according to the Pakistan Maternal Mortality Survey (PMMS) 2019 is 186 deaths per 100,000 live births.

Son preference remains strong in our society, and despite no official figures due to social taboos, some independent surveys have documented high prevalence of sex-selective abortions to abort a female foetus. An article titled ‘Sex-selective abortion in rural Pakistan’ published in the Journal of Advances in Medicine and Medical Research in 2017 reveals 34.9 per cent female foetal abortions in a sample of 968 ever-pregnant women who had induced abortions.

With this state of affairs, one wonders why it comes as a surprise to us when a woman gets murdered in cold blood by her intimate partner, or male blood relative. Hasn’t our society already established the status it accords to women and girls?

What we need is more than constitutional guarantees of gender equality and laws protecting women and girls. We need to re-establish the status of women to eliminate the prevalence, acceptance, and normalization of VAWG from our society because social media hashtags have neither done us any good nor have they guaranteed the punishment of men who hurt, abuse and kill us knowing that society will pardon them and blame the women.

The next generation of girls deserves better. Let’s all raise kinder, more responsible, and conscientious sons so our little girls of today live safer, happier lives as equal partners.

The writer is a human rights activist and expert on women and children’s rights.