

Dowry's socio-c

personal perspective

My parents were born in India; I was conceived at Dhaka of East Pakistan and delivered at Karachi. This implies that I literally descended from the patriarchal belt of South Asia. The status gained by being born and brought up as a South Asian woman taught me about all the losses ordained by this position long before I learnt through international exposure, experience and education that this was the result of gender difference and gender discrimination.

I am a woman, a medical doctor, a public health specialist, a teacher for health communication, a documentary filmmaker and a gender activist. All these are benign and powerless positions in a typical South Asian context. Therefore, I am a qualified non-specialist to express myself on this subject.

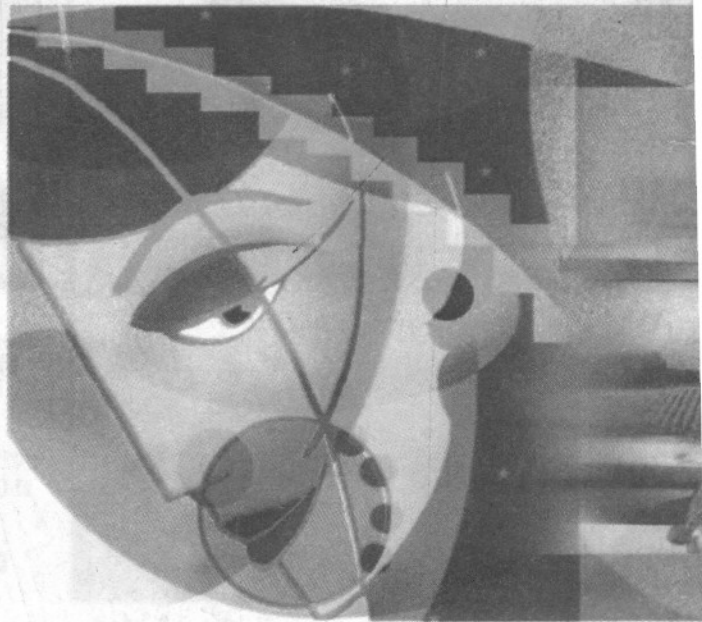
land. Gender-based violence is one of the burning agendas for social activists, as it relates to condition, situation and position of men and women constituting the society.

Pakistan - the land of the pure is characterised by regrettably low scores of development indicators, constant political instability, cultural heritage and traditions reflecting centuries old patriarchy and selective male-friendly application of the religion—Islam.

Being part of the male-domi-

and practices also govern Pakistani society. The contemporary culture, in spite of undergoing transition, mirrors images of centuries-old civilisations and indigenous cultures. One such cultural heritage, which has been adopted as an institution, is dowry or *jahez*.

This practice makes a girl-child less welcomed than a male child. Even today, a girl is perceived to be a burden and a boy to be a blessing. No wonder there are 79 million missing women



nated belt, the family in Pakistan is patriarchal. Traditionally, the father is the breadwinner and the mother is the housekeeper. The reputable mother-in-law is an advocate of superiority of her son in marriage. However, this cannot be generalised. In fact, there is not a homogenous Pakistan in this respect.

There is an urban Pakistan and a rural Pakistan. There is a Pakistan of masses and there is a Pakistan of classes. Considering the diversity of Pakistani society, female plight and predicament has different interpretations for women from different strata of society. They suffer similarly in different ways. Institutional and individual violence are not unknown phenomena for all Pakistani women.

Like all other societies, cultural institutions, beliefs, norms

only in South Asia, and Pakistan is one of the few countries where male to female ratio is reverse.

Dowry: crime or custom?

What is dowry? Encyclopaedias, thesauruses and dictionaries have explained it beautifully and simplistically. To me, it is a form of culturally sanctioned and socially acceptable violence, not only against women but also against men.

Despite relatively uninformed and unprepared acceptance of globalisation as a way of life, it appears rather strange that the institution of marriage is still intact in Pakistan.

Marriage is an important event in the life of a Pakistani woman. Getting married early is considered lucky. Obligatory *jahez* takes a heavy toll on the family of the bride. Dowry is a multi-faceted,

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By

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Dowry is a multi-faceted, deep-rooted gender issue with social, economic and health consequences. In spite of a consensus on disliking the practice, only a few have the courage to disown it

Pakistan, gender and violence

Violence against women is a global issue. Women have always been oppressed and abused intellectually, emotionally, physically and spiritually.

I have collected a little bit of the 'intellectual garbage', to have an idea what wise men think about women.

* God created woman. And boredom did indeed from that moment—but many other things ceased as well. - *Neitzshe*

* God became a man, granted. The devil became a woman. - *Victor Hugo*

* Men for the field and woman for the heart;

Men for the sword and for the needle she;

Men with the head and woman with the heart;

Men to command and woman to obey;

All else confusion. - *Lord Tenyson*

It would be too naive to reject any violent practices in our home-

cultural implications

deep-rooted gender issue with social, economic and health consequences. In spite of a consensus on disliking the practice, only a few have the courage to disown it.

According to renowned Indian writer Shri Sharma, the evolution of dowry is originally from a gift, creating expectations leading to demands and greed. A large dowry can be an important attribute of status to both men and women.

Dowry, which is popularly considered as a Hindu custom,

* It is considered a good support mechanism to help the new couple so that they have a convenient start in practical life.

* It has become a socially forced *fait accompli* that is followed and executed 'with a smile', notwithstanding, how painful it could be to the family.

Estimates of the percentage of women who experience domestic violence in Pakistan range from 70-90%.

During 1997, the Lahore press

clues. Here is the report of her research.

"I met Ms Naheeda Mahboob Illahi, advocate Supreme Court, on 9 January 2002. According to her, everyday a large number of cases of dowry-related violence are received but are mostly registered as 'domestic disputes'. The details of only three cases of dowry-related violence were provided - two cases in the year 2000 and one in 1997. In all these cases, the victims were tortured mentally and physically by their husbands' and in-laws, for not bringing sufficient dowry with them."

It remains a mystery for the social science researchers that why stoves burst in *susrals* only and why the victim is always a *bahu*?

Ironically, in spite of very high frequency of domestic violence and frequent cases of stove deaths, dowry-related violence is neither perceived nor recognised as an accepted form of violence, nor documented in social science literature. Therefore, unfortunately, it is not a popular theme or priority agenda item for organisations working on women issues.

There could be three possible reasons for this convenient forgetfulness. One reason might be that woman-related issues must not be taken out of the premises of home for the sake of honour. Second, the role of dowry in our marriage system has not gained deserved attention of international donors. Therefore, the hype stirred by comparable social problems such as child labour or environment, overshadowed a traditional area like dowry and related issues. Third, the *Ministry of Women Development in Pakistan* has yet to acknowledge dowry and dowry-violence as gender issues.

I have attempted to depict the socio-cultural dimensions of dowry through the following scheme.

Interventions in the public sector

Pakistan is a signatory to the *International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD)*, *Beijing plan of Action* and *Convention on the Elimination* of all forms of discrimination against

Women (*CEDAW*). In terms of implementation, the ideals of all such treaties are yet to be realised to cast an impact. Empowerment, access to equal rights and emancipation are yet only distant dreams for a vast majority of women.

However, there are a number of efforts now underway in Pakistan to empower the women; such as attempts to refine the *National Plan of Action*, develop micro credit plans, establish *Khushhali* (prosperity) bank, implement UN conventions and develop positive and productive partnerships with civil society, the NGOs and the private sector.

Personally, I am convinced that there is growing attention being given by the government to gender issues including violence, and there is some movement in this direction. But there is no obvious, focused and concentrated effort geared to the understanding of a complex and common issue like dowry. This is valid for all service delivery, advocacy, research and communication interventions.

Interventions in Pakistan

Efforts made by the NGO sector in connection with dowry can be summed up as disappointing. There had been localised and limited efforts by small-scale welfare societies in the 1960s and 1970s, aiming at awareness raising and motivation campaigns to convince people at the *mohalla* level to resist the mindless following of dowry demands.

However, with the advent of international donors in the 1980s, the NGOs in Pakistan have either undertaken campaigns against other more visibly anti-women oppressive mechanisms like *Hudood Ordinance* or political marginalisation under the Zia regime. Later, the NGOs took up issues of expressed violence, thus, being only symptomatic and not delving into the deep-rooted causes of violence against women; dowry being one primary cause.

Taking notice of the visible exclusion of dowry as a gender issue from the agenda and aims of development NGOs and

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has visibly migrated, escalated and embraced in all areas of the present-day Pakistan. It has become an active tradition, norm and religious practice for those who believe that there is an absence of such custom and tradition in their faith. The implication of this convenient forgetfulness is inattentiveness to dowry-related violence.

There are certain other factors that ensure the continuity of the practice of dowry such as:

* It is considered an incentive to lure a more suitable match.

* It is submission to the demand of a perceived 'suitable match'

* It is used as an excuse for denial of inheritance to women (the expenses on dowry and wedding are unilaterally decided by the men folk of the family as transfer of inheritance by other means).

reported an average of more than four local cases of women being burnt weekly, three of the four fatally. Police follow-up to these cases has been negligible with only six suspects taken into custody out of 215 cases reported in Lahore newspapers during the year. In 1997, there was not a single conviction in a 'stove-death' case in the country.

HRCP reported only one case of dowry-related violence in 2001. In that case the victim was burnt to death by her in-laws for not bringing sufficient dowry. A research study conducted by *Sachet* (an NGO) on gender-based violence as reported in the print media also confirmed this statistic.

Does this mean that in reality also, only one woman fell victim to dowry death? I sent one of our research officers to find some