

Society & Social Problems
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Crime again

In the last couple of years, the rate of suicide has increased manifold in Pakistan. Financial distress and social injustices seem to be the two main reasons for it. The fact that our society has turned a blind eye to the issue baffles many a mind

By Dr Gulzar H. Shah

attempts. Dozens who contemplate the act have not been counted here.

This year, the month of July brought along a number of suicide reports. In the third week of the month, 111 people killed themselves. Nine suicides were reported in Lahore and its surrounding areas on July 4 alone. What is going on?

Ironically, Minar-i-Pakistan, the symbol of independent and sovereign Pakistan, became the venue for July suicides. Within a week, four people made their "final exit" jumping off the historical structure, adding another dimension to its history. On July 16, in front of hundreds of viewers, an unknown 25-year-old man chose the Badshahi Mosque as the place to commit suicide at. In the last few weeks, the daily suicide count has remained fairly consistent.

In the absence of a national events registration system or hospitalization database, it is difficult to accurately describe at what rate the act is committed in Pakistan. However, the following bits of information may help understand the issue in a relatively better way.

In the first five months of 2004, the print media reported 203 suicides in Punjab alone, including 74 committed by women. Last year, Madadgaar, an NGO, reported 2,575 suicides in the first nine months. Another organization reported 3,475 suicides by women alone in the year 2002. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the rate of suicides

in Pakistan is touching alarming proportions, accounting annually for 30,000 to 35,000 lives.

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death around the globe.

In Japan, for instance, suicides claim over three times more lives than road accidents. Studies have shown that annually over a million suicides occur globally, increasing the burden on health care system. The worst loss is the suffering and pain inflicted upon the loved ones of the victim. Instances of forced suicides must

also be considered here. They involve the loss of lives of helpless innocent people who would have wanted to live. For example, in a case involving a trio of suicides in Lahore Cantt, the neighbours believe that Dr Farrukh willingly committed suicide, while forcing it on his wife and mother.

In addition to the loss of life due to completed suicides, attempted suicides often lead to disfigurement and disabili-

ty. Attempting to take your own life is an interesting form of failure that many do not regret. In fact those who are wise enough know that there is always light at the end of the tunnel.

According to different reports, men complete more suicides, while women attempt or contemplate more. It is so because of men's "macho" attitudes, high risk-taking behaviour, a

THE act of killing yourself deliberately is not to be taken lightly. It is a serious issue. In recent times, there has been a noticeable increase in suicide cases in Pakistan, which speaks volumes for the socio-economic environment that many people in Pakistan don't consider worth pondering over. It would be interesting to note that for every suicide committed, there are 10 to 20 failed

Illustration by Agha Riaz

inst yourself



or quest for perfect execution and a low tendency to seek professional medical help. Empirical evidence in Pakistani Punjab lends support to the universal trend — in the first six months of 2004, men were involved in 64 per cent of all suicide cases.

Many people wonder why some individuals kill themselves. The answer depends on who you ask. In a strug-

gling economy such as Pakistan's, most people's miseries start from and end with economic troubles.

In my opinion, not abject poverty but perceived marginalization, relative deprivation and disparity are the real reasons for the recent rise in suicide cases. The sense of contentment and value of hard work is fast losing its worth to consumerism and materialism.

If you ask a psychologist, suicidal behaviour is triggered by severe stress generated by serious personal crises. As perceptions of a worsening crisis hit home, control and self-esteem seem to wither away, giving way to alienation and isolation. Meanwhile, a chemical imbalance occurs, depleting serotonin, a neuro-transmitter that inhibits self-harm, diminishing agonized individual's

ability to think rationally.

To sociologists, social forces such as social cohesion or the lack of it, rather than personal troubles are the reasons for suicide attempts. Personal troubles are primarily triggered by rapid social change, leading to a sense of disorder, and in turn, to a form of suicide known as 'anomic suicide'. The notion is totally applicable to Pakistan, a society in transition wherein clashing cultural ideas are infiltrated thoroughly, thanks to the Internet, the Western media and rapid urbanization. Other reasons suggested by social analysts would include promoting a social cause, detachment from society which results in detachment from life, and retreatism in response to situations when one is simply not able to meet socially desirable goals within socially approved means.

Retreating is a coward's way of finding solutions, as Aristotle believes: "To run away from trouble is a form of cowardice and, while it is true that suicide braves death, the person does it not for some noble object but to escape some ill."

Some argue that the media is partially to be blamed. The idea that media coverage of suicides may contribute to their rise is not correct. Social problems never get resolved without widespread awareness. No publicity as a solution amounts to throwing the baby with the bath water.

If the recent empirical trends in Punjab are anything to go by, "unpleasant

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INTERVIEW

It's basically a cry for help

'When the depression is acute, a person with suicidal tendencies can't always hurt himself, but once the level of depression comes down, he may go for the kill'

By Peerzada Salman

ued act of violence when one has lost hope. This is the stage when the person doesn't listen to anyone and no warning leaves any impact on him.

Q. Is it a psychological ailment or a social problem?

A. It is definitely a psychological illness, which can be caused by some

and killed themselves.

Q. Do financial hiccups play a role in suicide attempts?

A. They are the most significant cause. There's a thing called 'drift hypothesis' according to which mental illness drifts people towards economic depriva-

disorder'. You know, in those countries people hardly get to see the sun. The weather is mostly dull and gloomy.

Q. Is it a proven fact that weather conditions can affect a person's psyche?

A. From 1975 to 1985, we at the JPMC, conducted a research, giving attention to all four seasons of the year.



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