**What place to call home?**

Kamila Hyat

Thursday, Jun 23, 2022

Across Lahore, and all the areas where large houses stand and chandeliers, marble finishing or other signs of luxury in worth can be spotted in the rooms downstairs, there quite often stands, a totally different kind of accommodation. This is apparently intended for domestic staff or ‘servant’ or perhaps more than one servant, and often consists of nothing more than the tin shack on the roof where the unfortunate individual who can manage nothing better and is compelled to work to feed himself or his family must live often with barely a pedestal fan in place and no windows or other amenities.

While looking at rental houses, even more shocking is the state of the toilets, which these individuals are expected to use. In some cases, the only way to shower is by standing over the commode itself and there is no availability of flushes or even basic dignities which should be the right of every man. The constitution of Pakistan declares every citizen as equal. Clearly, this is not accepted by the builders and owners of the palatial houses, even though they can easily afford to give another individual or individuals a decent living at the very least.

The problem extends deeper even into the larger colonies run by various building societies in all the towns and cities of the country. Separate laws have been put into place in these societies, some of which banish those whom we call domestic help from visiting parks in the area, simply because their profession is that of a chef or maid, or nurse to a baby rather than a housewife, a doctor, a teacher or someone else who owns the houses where these people work. In some cases, they are not even allowed the right to small windows in their rooms and must live with a tiny slit acting as a ventilator in the rooms, making it extremely difficult either to get any air or to fit up even a small room cooler which may make their life a little more bearable in temperatures with this year have reached a high of 47 degrees centigrade in Lahore and even higher in other cities.

Again, we wonder if the laws in these housing societies, which were formed under their own acts, are a violation of the constitution of Pakistan and if it should be permissible for people to be kept in such inhumane conditions with some obviously more equal than others. Surely, we cannot judge by a person’s profession if he or she is likely to peek into the houses of neighbours, the reason sometimes given for the slit window allowance or act in a rowdy manner in a park. Young men from families with plenty of money are perfectly capable of doing just the same.

This of course, brings us to the overall situation of housing in the country. With an expanding population, indeed an exploding population, there is too little housing to accommodate people and to cater to their needs. The result is that most people in cities live in shanty towns where there are no amenities such as basic sanitation and of course, no clean drinking water. Many survive in structures made of tin or cardboard and nothing more than that, fighting off the elements despite these conditions.

The failure to cater for more housing to accommodate people since the 1950s has now brought about disaster and is likely to bring about even more in the future when the population grows still further. And of course for single women from all class groups, there is very little available in terms of safe housing, with household help unsafe within the homes where they often work up to 12 hours a day and single professional women often unable to find housing even in major cities which can provide them both safety and a place where they can live their own lives without interference from the authorities who run the institution and without snide from neighbours about whatever habits or whatever routine they choose to follow in terms of socializing at night or going about the usual life of young women all over the world.

The question of housing and inequality within it is a pressing one. The problem has to be dealt with. The matter should be taken up in Parliament and discussed in some detail. We must ask if large building societies are to be allowed to put together their own laws and devise their own schemes to turn the giant authorities that they operate. It is true that in many cases, these authorities do offer a better standard of security than others. But the level of discrimination against people should be simply unbearable to the government of Pakistan and to the upholders of the constitution. The fact that no one is bothered about it is disturbing. One look at the rooms built for domestic help would shake most who believe even in the very essential rights of man, leave alone anything that amounts to decency or luxury.

Given the way our society is, we cannot even begin to expect domestic help to live as family members do, although this is the norm in many other countries of the world, including the Philippines, where the help dines with families in many cases. But our social norms cannot change immediately. They were born in colonial times and will remain with us for a far longer period to come. We can however consider some system which allows domestic help to gain at least a degree of dignity through the housing in which they are put and the amenities they are expected to use to meet their basic needs.

The constitution after all declares that housing is the right of all. There should also be phraseology about the decency of the housing and how it is to be built. This applies not just to housing societies, but to shanty towns and other areas all across the country. Too many are in such a poor state that one wonders how anyone can live there at all. But yet people have to. They have no choice.

At the moment the disparities are simply unbearable. It is hard to imagine who would allow any individual to live in the kind of inadequate shelters they have built for them with no provisions for weather conditions or for basic needs, which they require simply to live. Some say that they have no choice but to visit local mosques in order to use toilets. Others even in developed areas use fields or open spaces every morning.

This is a state of affairs that cannot continue and which surely needs to be taken up by those who look over the law of the land. We need change and we need to ensure that people are able to live decent lives no matter what their occupation, their class, their standard of education, or where they come from. This, after all, should be the basis in any country and is certainly needed in ours.

Email: kamilahyat@hotmail.com

The writer is a freelance columnist and former newspaper editor.