**GBV is preventable**

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Gender-based violence (GBV) is a global issue that affects individuals across all socio-economic backgrounds throughout the world.

GBV covers multiple forms of violence that are perpetuated against an individual or a group of individuals based on their gender. It arises from deep-rooted gender inequality, abuse of power and harmful norms. A person belonging to any gender can be a victim/survivor of GBV. However, it is important to mention that women are disproportionately affected.

Globally, one in three women experience physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner. As per UN Women estimates, though, only one in ten women seek help from the police. In the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, GBV intensified across the globe. A similar situation was seen in Pakistan, a country already ranked as the sixth most dangerous country in the world for women and one of the worst for gender parity.

According to UNFPA, about 32 percent of women have experienced physical violence whereas 40 percent of ever-married women have suffered from spousal abuse at some point in their life in Pakistan. However, these statistics do not accurately represent the full extent of cases because the majority of the cases go under-reported. Also, the numbers do not reflect the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The global increase in GBV was a result of the implementation of lockdowns in order to stop the spread of the coronavirus. Reports suggest that domestic violence, a form of GBV, intensified due to the closures of schools and offices as it left women and girls stuck at home with their abusers. This unprecedented increase in domestic violence was labelled as the ‘shadow pandemic’. It has been reported that cases of GBV intensified by a staggering 200 percent in Pakistan.

The most marginalised women and girls, such as refugees or indigenous women and those with disabilities are at a disproportionate risk and face greater barriers in accessing the Criminal Justice System (CJS) and support services. It is of utmost importance to ensure that every woman and girl has access to the CJS. However, these issues remain unaddressed. Although Pakistan adopted a National Action Plan on Covid-19, which provides guidelines to contain the spread of Covid-19, its objectives and approach do not consider gender perspectives. To date, comprehensive and inclusive approaches have not been adopted to address the increase in GBV and to ensure the extension of support services to the survivors.

The recent discovery of a new Covid variant, titled Omicron, is testament to the fact that the pandemic continues to present a threat to people all over the globe. Furthermore, it has been reported that Lahore may undergo a lockdown in order to tackle the toxic smog. Therefore, the imposition of lockdowns in the future is not out of question. This will once again result in increased cases of GBV.

The pandemic and the climate crisis reinforce the root causes of GBV, such as gender stereotypes and harmful social norms. Recently, Dr Nausheen Hamid, a member of the National Assembly stated that smoking in women is a cause of increasing divorce rates in Pakistan because they are not ‘accepted’ by their in-laws. Such remarks by a governmental official add fuel to fire and reinforce and normalise violence against women.

Although the government has enacted various progressive legislations including: the Anti-Rape (Investigation and Trial) Act 2021, Criminal Laws (Amendment) Act 2021 and the Sindh government’s enactment of the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2013, the Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act 2013 and the Sindh Commission on the Status of Women Act 2015, the conviction rate for GBV sits at only 1-2.5 percent. This is because they remain largely unimplemented. Additionally, it has been reported that one in two Pakistani women who have experienced violence never sought help or told anyone about the violence they had experienced.

This is because resources, services and responses for survivors/victims of GBV remain scarce. UNODC reports that there are only eight functioning shelter homes in Sindh. Of these, four are located in Karachi and the rest in Sukkur, Larkana and Hyderabad. There are no separate shelter homes for the transgender community, who remain marginalised to the greatest extent. Although Women Crisis Centers (currently four are functioning in Sindh, one each in Karachi, Hyderabad, Shaheed Benazirabad and Jacobabad) there is a complete lack of information on their availability and functioning.

Moreover, there is a lack of sensitivity training provided to CJS actors. Health services personnel are unstaffed and inadequately equipped. Also, referral systems are limited. Survivors/victims remain completely unaware about their rights and the process of enforcing them. This is exacerbated where women are not economically independent.

Furthermore, it has been reported that at least 14 countries around the world have started to address GBV as part of a longer-term Covid-19 recovery plan. Pakistan must step up and establish mechanisms in order to protect women and girls. The government must make an effort to spread awareness on how women and girls can protect themselves. Support services, women protection helplines (such as the Inspector General Police’s Complaint Cell helpline 9110, Sindh Human Rights Department helpline 0800-00011, Sindh Legal Aid Advisory Call Centre helpline 080070806), rescue services and information on shelter homes and crises centers must be broadcast through radio programmes and the local television media so that their details reach the most vulnerable women.

Moreover, there is an increasing need to educate men and boys on positive masculinity, respectful relationships and non-violent conflict resolution and parenting. This can also be broadcast through radio programmes and the local television media to reach all areas within the country.

Every year, an international campaign, ‘16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence’ is observed globally. This awareness campaign starts on November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, and runs until December 10, Human Rights Day. This is an opportunity for the government to bring together all civil society organisations and CJS actors to engage in discourse on increasing the capacity of support services and establishing novel mechanisms to correspond to the increased cases of GBV.

Research has suggested that GBV can be prevented if evidence driven knowledge, strategies and innovation is amplified to inspire all stakeholders to scale up what works. UNWOMEN revealed that “Prevention is still the most cost-effective, long-term way to stop violence”.

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