**Pushing back rape culture**

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Pakistan has an extremely high rate of rape cases, according to somewhat ‘unreliable’ statistics gathered on the topic. The problem in putting together ‘reliable’ statistics is based on the issue of what laws are in place in the country, how many rapes are reported, how many incidents of sexual assault are classified as rape, and other similar factors. However, we do know that in Pakistan around 10 rape cases are reported daily, and out of these cases, only 77 percent of those accused are convicted.

The PTI government had put forward a plan to deal with rape; with the PM calling for the chemical castration of rapists. The provision for legal chemical castration was however taken back by the government after the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) said that such punishment was un-Islamic. We do not know why the prime minister had not properly researched before putting out his frequently repeated opinions that chemical castration is the best way to deal with rapists. Chemical castration is a process which induces large amounts of a female hormone ‘progesterone’ into the body, reducing a man’s ability to carry out any kind of physical sex. However, it does not prevent assault in other forms and can have extremely serious side effects including the development of feminine features in the man and acute depression.

For this reason, it has been described as an unacceptable punishment by Amnesty International and other groups, and as one which should never be carried out without being accompanied by therapy and counselling sessions by other experts. In Europe, chemical castration is used in some countries but not as a form of punishment, but as a course of treatment on the request of a person who is guilty of multiple sex crimes and may feel that he requires help to overcome whatever problems he faces which trigger his violent behaviour towards those weaker than him.

In Pakistan, we need to understand that rape is not a sexual offence as such, but an exhibition of power over a weak person. This is perhaps the reason why even five-year-old girls are rape victims. The frequently given assertion that women’s clothes, for example more revealing clothes, ‘tempt’ men in some way to rape them is ludicrous and is not backed out by scientific evidence anywhere in the world.

It is also true that rape cases are not limited to Pakistan. Botswana recorded the world’s second-highest number of rape cases in 2020. This figure also changes as it depends on how the crimes are counted.

Pakistan has to figure out a way to deal with the problem. Women and child’s rights activists, such as those who organise the Aurat March, condemn chemical castration and describe it as an inhumane form of punishment. The answer lies in teaching men about consent, the importance of moving ahead with any gesture or association only when there is full consent, and empowering women to report rape far more frequently. Women should also be encouraged to carry pepper spray, as has become more common in neighbouring India where New Delhi, the capital, faces the problem of rising rape cases.

Indeed, pepper spray cans and visits to police stations to report rape – the two actions that ought to be carried out by women – cannot be the only answer to the problem. Instead, like Sweden, we need to ensure that perpetrators of rape are punished on a timely basis and sentenced to imprisonment – as prescribed in the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) – and that such punishments are meted out regularly and without discrimination. Too often, women do not move ahead with rape cases because of how they are treated during the investigation process, making the crime even worse.

To achieve this, the government needs to work on sensitising the police, medico-legal officers, the judiciary, and all others involved with the process of handling such crimes. Therapists who can help women deal with the trauma they suffer should also be encouraged to offer help to all women – and men and children as well – who report rape or other kinds of sexual assault. Findings from several US institutions have noted that almost all victims of rape or serious sexual crimes suffer severe trauma, which can last a lifetime.

In exchange for this, we do not need draconian punishments for offenders. We need harsh punishments, which, more importantly, are regularly meted out, combined with a full and up-to-date investigation by the police using modern methods. In developed countries, DNA evidence has changed the entire structure and investigation process of rape cases. With orders already in place in our country, permitting DNA evidence in court will give the same favourable results. Old methods of testing for rape, for example using the ridiculously old-fashioned and inaccurate two-finger test that has been recently discontinued by the Lahore High Court (LHC), must be abandoned.

What is important is to talk to children of both genders – when they are old enough to understand such topics – about consent, treating all people as equal, accepting behaviours in other people that they may not be interested in themselves, and understanding that assaulting or harassing women, or those weaker than them, is a crime that is punishable by law. Countries which have been able to do so are more successful than others in minimising the number of rape crimes, although the crime itself may not have disappeared in these countries.

Scandinavian countries are a prime example of this and although rape occurs in these nations as well, they have encouraged women to come forward immediately to report these cases and taken every possible measure to ensure the perpetrators are punished. This has brought down the number of rapes committed in such nations. Essentially, there must be an understanding that rape is a crime, intended to demonstrate power over another individual, just as children brought up in a brutal society try to demonstrate power by torturing an animal or carrying out some similar offence.

We need to see rape in these terms and carefully consider how to deal with rapists. Therapy can be one of the practices deployed to reduce the number of these crimes. Concrete measures can help deal with this situation, instead of simply passing laws only to revoke them and making speeches only to say that they are irrelevant.

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