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**Rethinking masculinity**

When a horrific case like that of Noor Mukadam surfaces, we often paint the perpetrator as either a ‘psycho’ or a ‘monster’. This helps us explain the evil that leads to such a gruesome crime as somehow exceptional; it gives us comfort. The actual truth is simply too much to bear – that it is our society that created the conditions for such a crime to occur.

While Noor’s case is particularly horrific, we have become almost accustomed to reading about such cases almost on a daily basis. Before Noor, it was Quratulain, and before Quratulain it was Saima, and before her lie the bodies of countless women murdered at the hands of enraged men, and they continue to pile up in our headlines almost every day. Each time such a case emerges in public – and many never even make it that far – there is understandable public outrage. Hashtags begin to trend, and protests are hastily organized by feminists in various cities. Many on the Right call for public hangings while liberals and progressives call for the passage of more laws to protect women and for the strengthening of institutions. After a few days, the anger begins to fizzle out as people move on with their lives – that is, until the next victim falls.

But each time such a case surfaces, women grow angrier – some becoming numb with despair. Many point out that, while such cases may seem exceptional, gender-based violence is pervasive in our society. To this, many men respond by saying ‘not all men’, only further enraging women who point out that the numbers of men who commit acts of violence are much higher than we realise, that violence comes in various forms, physical but also psychological, emotional and even financial, and that many men perpetuate a violent culture even if they are not violent themselves. This desire amongst men to distance themselves from violent killers by saying ‘not all men’ is understandable. However, what these men (and many women) fail to see is that male violence exists on a spectrum. While most men might not be murderers or rapists, the persistence of these kinds of violent crimes is part of a systematic problem. This is a problem with what R W Connell calls our ‘gender order’, and particularly with our conception of masculinity.

While not all men resort to physical violence against those who are weaker than them, shockingly high numbers actually do. According to UN Women, about a quarter of women in Pakistan have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence during their lifetimes. This number, which many men like to proudly point out is lower than some countries in Europe or North America, is most definitely a gross under-estimate given the low rates of reporting due to fear and shame. Sadly, many women are also socialized to accept violence at the hands of husbands and male family members as ‘normal’ and hence would never even think to report. Others are understandably worried about the repercussions. The cases that do make the news, although increasingly frequent, are only just the tip of the iceberg. And while men often point out that women can be violent too, cases of violence committed by women against men are extremely rare, particularly in our context.

Unlike our prime minister, who has repeatedly argued that men are ‘naturally’ inclined to commit violence if they see scantily clad women – a very popular sentiment amongst many in Pakistan – as a sociologist, I would argue that no human being is naturally violent regardless of their gender. Rather, violence is learned. Hence, rather than placing the onus on women as our society generally does or asking how women can protect themselves from violent men, what we should be asking is: what is it about the way men are socialized that leads so many to commit acts of violence? Clearly there is something wrong with the way we are raising our boys that leads so many of them to grow into violent men.

A big part of this socialization is the idea that men are naturally violent and cannot control their sexual urges. This becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Because the starting point is that circumstances bring out the ‘natural’ violence of men, the questions after a crime always revolve around what the woman did that led the man to act violently. The fact is that men act violently in a variety of circumstances, and hence the problem is not external; it lies with the man himself.

Another part of this socialization is the idea that the only valid emotion men can express is anger, and that the only means of expressing that anger is through aggression – verbal, physical or both. Boys are told from a young age that it is unmanly to express vulnerability, pain or sadness, that to do so is a sign of weakness (and hence femininity). This often leads them to bottle up emotions until they manifest in violent or self-destructive forms. As women we are socialized to accept male rage as natural, to tip-toe around men so as not to set them off and tolerate verbal and physical violence as a normal part of being in a relationship with a man.

While strengthening laws and institutions is urgent, including passing the Domestic Violence Bill, as a society we must also begin to tackle the structural roots of male violence by interrogating and eventually dismantling our dominant conception of masculinity. While many well-meaning men think it is not their place to talk about gender and hence silent at such times, I would argue the opposite. Men must be part of the conversation. However, rather than telling women how to protect themselves or engaging in meta-analysis of the roots of patriarchy as they often do, men must start critically reflecting on the concept of masculinity. It is only when they start to collectively introspect and undo the violent patterns they have learned, to find forms of expression that are constructive rather than destructive, and to truly treat women as equals as opposed to objects or possessions that we will be able to move towards a society that is truly safe for all people.

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