**Saving women**

BY S A R A H N I Z A M A N I 2021-09-01

ON July 20, Noor Mukaddam, the daughter of a former Pakistani diplomat, was killed in an upscale Islamabad neighbourhood. The incident was particularly reprehensible not only because of its gruesome nature but also because it was yet another example of brutality against women.  
  
Cases of violence in recent times have included the killing of a mother of four in Hyderabad, the torture of a couple in Islamabad at the hands of the accused harasser Usman Mirza, the shooting of a woman by her husband in Peshawar, the rape and murder of a beggar and her toddler in Rawalpindi and the assault on a female TikToker by almost 400 men at Minar-i-Pakistan in Lahore. Once again, the women in the country are being reminded of how unsafe they are.  
  
According to new data released by the WHO, globally, one in three women have been subjected to physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes, often by someone they love or live with. While femicide has been a global crisis for centuries, there is no denying that the higher society`s tolerance for domestic violence, the more frequently the latter occurs. Women in Africa are four times more likely to be killed by their partner or f amily than those in Europe, while 80 per cent of Afghan women justify beating at the hands of one`s husband if the wife burns the food or neglects the children. Also, 80pc of women surveyed in rural Egypt report and justify beating, especially if a woman refuses intimacy with her husband. This is pre-pandemic data; there is sufficient evidence that the pandemic has worsened matters. Locked up with their abusers with little or no help, women are having a tough time protecting themselves.  
  
The idea of disciplining women is not new and is acceptable in many cultures; the cost is borne by both victims and wider society.  
  
Abused women report severe levels of stress which reduces their output significantly and they are likely to earn less. In a country where only 20pc of women are in the formal labour force, this is troubling. Apart from economic concerns, there are healthcare issues.  
  
Studies show that babies born to abused mothers are underweight and likely to grow up to become complex individuals with the potential to be victims or abusers themselves.  
  
Women play a crucial role in building economies and shaping futures; empowering them is necessary for a nation to thrive. Still there are ways to help women as explained here.  
  
It is important to understand why it is difficult for women to quit abusive relationships in the first place. One cause of women tolerating abuse is poverty. If a mother has to choose between enduring abuse and having no shelter for her kids, she of ten opts for the former. A review of 22 studies revealsthat in 16, where women in vulnerable households were provided with modest but consistent payments with some basic training in nutrition or childcare, they were attacked less by men. Cash improves their bargaining power and reduces economic uncertainty in the household.  
  
There are other ways to help as well, and one example comes from Nicaragua, one of the poorest nations in South America.  
  
Foreign researchers in Nicaragua noticed that the number of women suffering from physical violence dropped from 28pc in 1995 to 8pc in 2016. During the same period, 72pc said they were never beaten by their partner in 2016; the same number was 45pc in 1995.  
  
This success story can be compared to America`s af ter the Violence Against Women Act, 1994, but the US government spent billions while Nicaragua managed it cheaply.  
  
The 1979 revolution in Nicaragua allowed women to speak up. The government wasn`t feminist, but it listened to women`s groups who pushed for laws such as criminalisingviolence against women and making five-year plans to curb it. Women activists also went door to door and to classrooms with their message. This helped increase awareness that led to more shelters andwomen police stations.  
  
For society to be less sexist, attitudes need to change. This requires educating young minds. The curriculum needs to teach women-friendly values and stigmatise violence. Boys need to be taught young that real men don`t hurt. Girls need to be taught how to recognise and escape violence before it`s too late. Subsidised programmes for teaching young couples conflict-resolution skills will help too. However, education cannot do this alone. Abusers must face punishment and stigmatisation.  
  
Violence against women should be criminalised and reporting for women should be made easier by providing all-out state support. Women often fear reporting violence as they might not be believed, or worse, killed. This needs to change.  
  
In a nutshell, solutions to violence against women include cash transfers, training, supporting women`s movements, education, stricter laws, accountability and stigmatisation of abusers. The authorities and society at large need to take these proposals seriously. The writer is a research fellow at IBA Karachi.  
  
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