**Violence against women**

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The horrific assault faced by a woman at Greater Allama Iqbal Park in the middle of Lahore at the hands of hundreds of men was shocking. The woman was publicly humiliated, abused, assaulted; manhandled and groped for hours.

The video clips of this gruesome crime circling around on social media are enough to show how we have brutalised our society. How much lower can we fall? The sick criminal behaviour of nearly 400 men is more than enough to hang our heads in shame. But I don’t know how many times we have to hang our heads in shame.

This is not an isolated crime or incident but part of a larger problem. Several horrifying acts of violence against women have been reported in recent months.

Even more shocking and disgusting are the arguments used to defend such criminal acts. Instead of condemning such criminal acts of abuse, rape, harassment against women, some people continue to blame the victims, raising questions on victim’s clothes, character and appearance. The real issue is the medieval feudal and tribal traditions and values and socio-economic structures. We continue to impose reactionary feudal and tribal traditions and customs in the name of religion and social values.

The social conservative elements of our society declare every criticism on the status of women and every demand to improve the situation as an attack on our social and religious values. They declare every progressive law and reform to empower and protect women as an assault on social, cultural and religious values.

Every time a horrifying account of abuse, rape, torture or killing of a woman comes to the light, we hope that this will be last time that such a crime committed against woman. We hope that our anger and strong reaction will be enough to change the situation. But we are reminded every other month that we were wrong. Nothing really has changed on the ground.

We need a sustained movement to put pressure on the government to take measures to make Pakistan a much safer place for our women. The condemnation on the part of political parties is not enough. They must make women’s rights part

of their political narratives. The media also has an important role to play in not only spreading awareness but also reminding the rulers to take practical steps to improve the situation.

We need a national movement for the empowerment and protection of women. Women in our

country continue to face abuse, violence, discrimination and sexual harassment. Every gruesome crime committed against women in our country reminds us that women are not safe and we are not doing enough. We are not ready to accept the fact that we are not treating women fairly.

Ask a working woman who goes out for work what she faces on a daily basis on public transport, on the streets and at workplaces. Working women endure all that and more on a daily basis.

Women have been killed for merely turning down a marriage proposal. It is not a coincidence that Pakistan is one of the lowest ranked countries in the world as far as the status of women is concerned.

Pakistan was ranked 153rd out of 156 nations by the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap index; it placed 151 out of 153 in 2020. In a Thomas Reuters Foundation poll in 2018, Pakistan was ranked as the sixth-most dangerous country for women.

We haven't fully realised the magnitude of the problem. We are a patriarchal society in which men dominate. From their education to who they marry, women’s decisions are made by the male members of the family.

Lack of education, awareness, poverty, and rampant misogyny in the country are the usual factors in all this. However, the recent surge in crime against women also points a finger at the complicity of the state for its inability, or even a lack of desire, to protect women.

We have made many laws for the protection of women in the last two decades but clearly lack the will and determination to implement these laws. Our social norms, medieval traditions and feudal and tribal cultures also create hurdles in the implementation of these laws. The laws alone are not going to make a big difference.

We need to educate our young men and boys at homes, schools and workplaces about women’s rights. They need to be educated that women are not inferior but equal human beings. They deserve respect and fair treatment not only as sisters, mothers and daughters but as women. We need to educate our young men and boys how to behave in public places in the presence of women. We need to give special emphasis on women rights in our textbooks as well.

The police were informed about the Lahore incident but as usual the police response was pathetic, arriving at the scene after nearly two hours. We need serious reforms in our police and judicial system. Our police, prosecution and lower judiciary is failing our women.

The honourable Justice Mansoor Ali Shah in a landmark judgement provided the basis to initiate such reforms.

The writer is a freelance journalist