[**An ugly crime**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1746176/an-ugly-crime)

[Luay Shabaneh](https://www.dawn.com/authors/10276/luay-shabaneh) Published April 6, 2023

The writer is representative of UNFPA in Pakistan.

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I STILL remember how suffocated I felt, and how my heart broke while reading the story of the 10-year-old IDP girl who was kidnapped and gang-raped just after her family fled a flood-hit village in Sindh to dwell on a footpath last October. Maybe, the family would have decided not to flee the devastating floods had they known the horrible lifelong pain their daughter would suffer.

Unfortunately, Pakistan has seen a surge in cases of gender-based violence including sexual violence in recent years. There are women heroes who have brought the perpetrators to court. The bright side of this story is that these women championed speaking up and not giving up their rights, but the sad side is the multiplied pain they went through. Too many women in Pakistan, and elsewhere, are exposed to different types of sexual violence every day. These inhumane, unfair and ugly acts should stop forever.

The most recent statistics show that at least one-quarter of women from 15 to 49 years in Pakistan have experienced physical violence. The numbers still do not paint the complete picture — as a lot of underreporting can be expected — but the stories of the survivors do. The number of women and girls who have survived sexual violence in Pakistan is six per cent. Women and girls with disabilities are three times more likely to experience sexual violence. The risk of sexual violence also escalates during conflicts and humanitarian settings as women and girls move to temporary shelters, and health and protection services are disrupted.

Sexual violence takes place anywhere, by anyone, and in many forms — at home, at the workplace, in public transport, markets and streets, at refugee and IDP camps, and educational institutions. It can be committed not only by strangers but also intimate partners, relatives, family members, neighbours, co-workers, and service providers. It includes but is not limited to child sexual abuse, incest, rape, sexual exploitation, online sexual abuse, and non-contact sexual abuse. It is not only a heinous crime but a blatant violation of human rights. It should never be overlooked and excused; in fact, it should not happen at all. Therefore, the response to such crimes should be comprehensive, everywhere and at any time.

Only response and prevention can end sexual violence.

Sexual violence brutalises bodies, scars minds, instils a feeling of insecurity and stigma in survivors and their families, and tears down the social fabric if condoned. Survivors often suffer from various mental health problems, isolation, depression, and anxiety. They can also contract HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases. Further, there is the economic toll that the survivors bear, and society pays in the form of lost human capital. Research shows that survivors of sexual violence experience lifelong economic disadvantages from anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. Survivors are also susceptible to giving up their education and economic careers.

Putting a full stop to sexual violence is only possible through response and prevention.

An efficient response programme ensures that survivors receive confidential and quick support with legal advice, fair medico-legal services, and speedy trials. Psycho-social support helps survivors fight stigma and shame and economic opportunities help them settle back into their lives. A well-coordinated response needs law-enforcement, health and judicial services in place, without which lengthy trials, delayed investigations, gaps in evidence, and insensitive officers and prosecutors add to the survivors’ ordeal.

The road to the prevention of sexual violence is a winding one, yet it is the right path. One of the key milestones is in­­formation, educ­ation and awar­e­­­ness among both men and women. This is why the UNFPA launched a global campaign on bodily autonomy and body rights to advocate for information and services and empower women and girls to make informed choices. Early investment in adolescents can bear long-term fruit. UNFPA supports life-skills-based education as a primary prevention approach since it helps cultivate positive attitudes and healthier values in adolescents, which sets the foundation for non-violent relationships.

An action-oriented guide such as the recently launched Federal Response Framework for cases of sexual violence is a commendable step from the government of Pakistan as it has a map of actions for law-enforcement, judiciary, health and other government departments to prevent and handle cases of sexual violence. The enactment of the Anti-Rape (Investigation & Trial) Act, 2021, with investigation rules, trial procedures, crises cells and medico-legal rules will ensure safety, dignity and freedom for women and girls who can then fulfil their destiny and contribute productively to the economy and society.

*The writer is representative of UNFPA in Pakistan.*

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