**[‘Baji, let it be’](https://www.dawn.com/news/1726601/baji-let-it-be)**

[Zubeida Mustafa](https://www.dawn.com/authors/975/zubeida-mustafa) Published December 16, 2022

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PAKISTAN is regressing; the extent of its decline can be measured by the treatment meted out to its women. What happened at Mujahid Colony in Karachi not too long ago has set new standards of ‘beastliness’ on the part of state functionaries in subduing women. The confrontation between women and the police took place when the authorities, having decided to widen a road in North Nazimabad, sent demolition teams to clear so-called encroachments. I will not go into the legalities of the issue as controversy surrounds it.

What is undisputed is that demolition work started in October and the evictees were resisting the move. Periodically, there were clashes. But Nov 21 proved to be different in a significant way. On this fateful day, police personnel — both male and female — arrived early in the morning, with an air of ‘enough is enough’. When they set out to disperse the protesters by resorting to brutalities of the worst kind, the gender factor was thrown to the wind. I wish to comment on the male police’s manhandling of the women, even though there were women law enforcers on the scene. The details of the incident were given to me by a member of the Urban Resource Centre (URC) in a note. She has been visiting Mujahid Colony to meet the evictees.

It is this aspect of the matter — the police’s handling of the women — that I wish to comment on. These facts have so far not been categorically denied by anyone. Even the police, when contacted by the Women’s Action Forum, apparently said that they could not rule out the likelihood of such behaviour by their personnel, as such practices have existed since the colonial times and the department has no funds to train its staff and sensitise them to gender issues.

Briefly put, the male police used tear gas and force in abundance against the protesters. The last straw came when they started hauling up the demonstrators, and in their haste to wind up the show, they physically picked up three minor girls — tearing off the hijab of one of them — and dumped them in the police van. They were allegedly taken to the Nazimabad thana. That itself was a violation of the rules: they should have been taken directly to the Liaquatabad women’s police station, where they were eventually sent after having been brutalised the whole day at the Nazimabad thana.

Police brutality continues to scale new heights.

It was heart-wrenching to hear the account of how they were thrashed on their thighs, scratched and bitten on their faces while attempts were allegedly also made by booted law enforcers to attack their private parts. They were made to clean the toilets and offered urine when they asked for drinking water. They were let off a little before midnight, when community leaders came to their rescue. The URC member managed to trace them and talked to them. She found them traumatised, with one victim saying she couldn’t talk. “Baji, let it be,” she said. The family said they wanted anonymity.

Not much has been heard about this alleged incident. The authorities have taken no notice of it. No promise had been made to investigate the matter that the URC member had the courage to report, with a sense of hopelessness that women will stop protesting against the violation of their rights. Some shocking suggestions have been made to the effect that these minors should come into the open to fight their case.

The apathy of the government is appalling. Pakistan is a party to six international human rights conventions, which range from the rights of children and women to the Convention aga­inst Torture and Other Cruel, In­­hu­man and Degrading Treatment or Punis­hment. Each of these instruments was signed and ratified at a time when the PPP ruled at the centre. Was this just a ploy to project the party as progressive and enlightened? Not a single one of these conventions has been observed in letter and spirit. Even the women’s police stations set up by Benazir Bhutto in 1994 are meaningless.

More painful is the selfishness that has deadened the public conscience. We have lived in worse times. Gen Zia was a military dictator who flogged and hanged people in public. Yet people raised their voices. Whether it was the Tarannum case, when a child was kidnapped, raped and murdered, or the time when the late human rights activist Asma Jehangir was manhandled by the police for protesting against the law of evidence in 1983, the public reacted and the police had to step back.

As for the police, no government — civilian or military — has really been serious about reforming the force. All governments have used the police as a personal tool to protect themselves against all dissent. The police have never been a public service body designed to ensure the citizens’ security. Can they do any better?

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