**Empowering women**

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Recent events of violence against women have triggered a debate in Pakistan, where women’s clothes and religion have taken centre stage and have taken the shape of liberal vs conservative ideologies. Unless we look at it from a historical and broader perspective, there is little hope of any way forward. Violence against women is an extreme expression of misogyny.

Misogyny is not a recent phenomenon. Its roots go back to Greek mythology. It crosses all geographical, cultural, religious and class boundaries. Misogyny literally means hatred of women. It expresses itself from sexism to outright violence. And although violence is usually seen as physical and sexual violence, it has other dimensions as well such as economic, social, political and emotional violence.

Globally, more than 700 million women have experienced violence. At the top of the list are women from sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East and South Asia. Pakistan ranks 153rd out of 156 nations on the Global Gender Gap 2021 index. In the South Asian region, it ranks seventh among eight countries, only better than Afghanistan. The most common place where this violence takes place is victims’ homes and the most common perpetrators are close relatives of either gender.

Some researchers have categorised sexism into benevolent and hostile sexism. Hostile sexism is obviously expressed through a range of behaviours as mentioned above. Benevolent sexism hides itself in the cloak of praising women. For example, notions of women being pure, more righteous, morally superior to men, their role as mothers, sisters, wives as supportive, who adore their male counterparts and will sacrifice anything to please them, as being second to none.

At the same time, women who are obedient, soft spoken and compliant with social norms are praised as role models. After being exposed to this narrative, some women internalise it. These women become allies of men in enforcing this social code upon other women, not just to prove their superiority, but to gain men’s favour and stay in their good books.

How has this phenomenon become so pervasive and deep rooted in the human psyche that it has persisted generation after generation all over the world? There is one concept as the root cause of all of this; it is that women are not accepted as being their own agents. They have been considered as an appendage to men, something that does not or cannot have its own independent existence; or, in other words, they do not have their own agency. This is the overarching problem. Unless this is addressed, women cannot be free.

So what is women’s agency? It is “the ability to identify goals, make choices, and then act upon them.” It is linked with the idea of women’s belief in themselves to do something. Women have to be first aware of the wrong being done to them. Then, they have to decide to take action and, last, they should be able to carry these decisions out. In many cases, women do realise the wrong being done to them and also know what should be done, but lack the courage or resources to actually do it. Unless this is changed, women will continue to suffer.

In order to increase women’s agency, we have to work on three fronts. First, we have to take steps to empower women. Countless studies suggest that education and economic self-sufficiency are the two most important factors that lead to women’s empowerment. In Pakistan’s context, it means to enforce mandatory, free-of-cost, quality education for all girls at all levels, and to ensure equal access to employment and business opportunities. This means the availability of safe and comfortable transport, training at workplaces, and security from harassment at work, and access to capital for business ventures.

Many women will benefit through cooperative business ventures which will need capital and training. At the same time, measures have to be taken to support them in carrying out their household and childbearing, and child rearing, responsibilities through access to proper healthcare facilities and establishing childcare facilities.

Second, we have to address deleterious social norms. They are powerful determinants of how men and women behave towards each other, what kind of behaviour is rewarded and what is punished, how workload and responsibilities are divided, which kind of work is considered more valuable than the other and how is it rewarded, and what kind of opportunities are available to men and women.

Currently, in Pakistan, social norms put women at a lower level than men. In the workplace, they are underpaid. At home, they do unpaid work as care givers, and in terms of house work. Over time these social norms become legalised. So, it is important to review and address and rectify these social norms. This can be done through educational institutions, media, art and culture, developing allies among thought leaders, and gender sensitivity training in work places and communities.

The target audience is not just men but also women. We must remember that these norms are a result of decades, rather centuries, of the subconscious inculcation of some concepts, ideologies and behaviours, and will take time to counter and reverse.

Third, laws have to be made and implemented to ensure that women have full freedom to exercise their rights to make and carry out decisions. They have to be facilitated and protected, wherever needed.

Another important aspect of this problem is that men, when exploited, oppressed and insulted in a class-based social, economic and political structure, become frustrated, angry and violent. This results in wife beating and child abuse at home and violence against women on streets. After all, who is weaker than children and women in such a social structure?

It must be said that an egalitarian social structure is not just liberating for women, but also for men, as some social norms are deleterious for men as well. For example, in our society, mostly men have to bear economic responsibility; they cannot show emotions and have to look after the wellbeing of their families. In some cases, boys are thrust under pressure in the absence of an adult man. As a result of which, they don’t reach their full potential.

Gender equality is also an economic issue. Economies cannot grow, poverty cannot end and peace cannot be achieved without women being full partners in social, economic and political processes.

This will not happen under the current class-based system where the state has been captured by a small number of elites, who don’t want to empower even men in the lower socio-economic layers of society, let alone women.

Empowered women will be a threat to this structure built on the exploitation of humans. An egalitarian society can only be built in a state run by the people, for the people – this is a huge undertaking in a society fed on myths and make-belief stories.

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