**Question of empowerment**

Kamila Hyat

Thursday, Jun 30, 2022

Recently, the Punjab government, notably spokesperson for the government and Minister Attaullah Tarar, has spoken about introducing a rape emergency in the province, because of the high number of assault cases against girls and women being reported from Punjab. The average stands at four to five cases per day, but estimates are that the numbers are probably far higher, given that many victims of rape or assault do not report that they have suffered this crime.

One of the issues is the manner in which to address the problem. In his briefing, Tarar suggested parents not leave their children alone at home alone and watch over them carefully. In principle, this sounds like a practical warning. But the reality also is that many children suffer assault or rape within their own homes and not outside them. This is also true of older girls and women. The question of incest, a disturbingly familiar problem in our society according to groups dealing with child abuse, means that children are at risk at home from relatives, neighbours and persons who work in their homes.

But the most common perpetrators of crimes against children of a sexual nature are relatives, often those who are fairly closely linked within the family, and whose crime is not reported because children are asked to cover up the matter, rather than create any kind of rift in the family. There are many complications in the matter of rape and keeping children in the home, even with another adult in supervision, does not mean that they are safe.

A better idea from the minister is that education be imparted in schools to children on how to keep themselves safe. This is a sensible suggestion, provided that we are willing to go into it head-on and not hide any of the ugly realities that exist in our society. Even at elite schools, parents have opposed sex education of any kind, on the basis that this could make them more aware of acts of a sexual nature that they did not know existed. This is a fallacy. In this age of the internet, children are aware of all kinds of sexual acts at an extremely early age, and it would be best to provide them accurate and balanced information on the matter, based on the age group, rather than let them depend on unreliable knowledge from dubious internet websites or from peers.

Schools need to run a campaign for this purpose and when harassment occurs in schools, as it has in the past, the institution needs to be extra careful about ensuring it is not covered up, but brought out in the open and discussed with parents with action taken against the perpetrator.

The main issue here, however, is that rape and assault is essentially a matter of power rather than sexual frustration. This is why children and even babies are targeted, quite often within their own homes, or at other places they should be able to consider safe. We need to study the problem in greater detail and work out what the parameters are that lead to such actions on such a frequent basis. And we also need to give children the confidence to report assault openly and freely and to talk about it both with parents and teachers. The fact that we live in a society where this is not acceptable makes things far harder for the victims, for their parents and for others involved in the matter.

Because children are discouraged from reporting any kind of harassment or are embarrassed to do so, the crimes continue, perpetrators are not punished, and as a result, more crimes are committed. In fact, even in cases where the rape or assault has been reported by the child or a young woman or indeed an older woman the perpetrators often escape without punishment, leading to a greater risk of similar crimes being committed in the future because people know that rapists get away scot-free, and that there is no certain punishment for them at the end of the process.

Better police investigation and more skillful use of forensics, as well as techniques intended to build confidence in both children and women to report rape would help solve the problem to some degree at least. At present, too many are scared to come forward with their accounts of what has happened. Yet, according to the limited number of studies, most women and girls in most provinces in the country have suffered harassment or assault of one kind or another at some point in their lives.

Yes, Attaullah Tarar is right when he says this is a problem we need to deal with. The misogynist culture created over the most recent years, notably after the PTI came to power, simply contributes to the risk they are at. The right steps need to be taken but we need a commission of experts to determine what these steps should be and how they should be implemented. Organizations working for the rights of women need to be kept involved and the entire process discussed with them if we are to bring down the rate of rape in our society.

There is a belief that our larger cities have some of the highest rates of rape in the world, with Lahore and Karachi leading in this matter. Lately, there has been more reporting of harassment at colleges and universities across the country. This harassment has occurred even during exams. The fact that young women are more willing to come forward and report these crimes is a good sign. Perhaps in the future, we can become a society where there is more willingness to discuss violence against women and dispel the idea that actions of women somehow compel men to carry out acts of sexual violence against them. Such ridiculous ideas have been put forward even by the former prime minister Imran Khan.

We need to deal with rape and assault on both boys and girls as a very serious matter, and one which is becoming more and more widespread and open in our society. The age of social media may have contributed to this. But we need to find solutions and these need to be found as quickly as possible with a commission set up to discuss how best to educate children of various ages, through their textbooks and through lessons at school, which are perhaps compulsory for all children so that parents cannot pull their children out of them and thus leave them vulnerable to violent crimes of various kinds as a result of their lack of knowledge and their lack of information as to how to go about reporting any act which threatens them or counts as an act of molestation against them.

The writer is a freelance columnist and former newspaper editor.

She can be reached at: kamilahyat@hotmail.com