[Munazza Siddiqui](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/munazza-siddiqui)

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**Stunted councils**

Human rights violations arising specifically from panchayats/jirgas (village councils) in Pakistan are signs of the times to come. Why panchayats/jirgas in particular? Because they are a microcosm of large swathes of our non-urban society, and poster cases of human apathy.

While present-day panchayats are marginally effective in small civic disputes, these village councils almost always favor the rich and powerful in cases with high stakes. Even though the Supreme Court of Pakistan has declared the orders and decisions of panchayats illegal and against the spirit of the constitution as well as international law, these village councils continue to flourish and operate openly beyond the permissible limits of law, which allow them to only and only act as arbitrators, mediators and negotiators.

When almost half of society is caught in the vicious cycle of stunted growth, it’s not difficult to imagine the extent of apathy and lack of conscience displayed at regularly-held panchayats across the country.

Yet, these village councils exist. Because they are cheaper and swift compared to our legal system – even if it’s all at the expense of the victims. People in non-urban areas have neither the money nor the time for our esteemed lawyers and courts. And so far the federal and provincial governments haven’t been able to do anything meaningful to change this tragic reality.

To borrow from The Orville, “[The] history of moral progress can be measured by the expansion of fundamental rights to those who have been denied them.”

And denied they have been. So far around 70 young women have committed suicide in Thar, Sindh, in 2020 alone. These women were driven to taking their lives because they could no longer live with the daily violence against them. Our laws are barely equipped to target those who are accessory to murder, let alone suicide. Expecting the police to charge culprits in such suicide cases is like taking ‘hope’ for a ride.

The handling of the recent case of 22-year-old Geeta Sothar is a mockery of justice. Geeta’s body was found hanging by the police on Nov 6, 2020, in Mithi, Tharparkar. Her family lodged an FIR against her in-laws, accusing them of killing her. Citing autopsy results, the police declared the cause of death to be suicide. Then a video of the local jirga went viral in which Geeta’s father-in-law and brother-in-law reportedly admitted to killing her and hanging the body to make it look like suicide. They also submitted a written apology to the jirga which was allegedly headed by a PPP councillor.

Held in clear violation of law, the jirga ordered the accused to pay Rs15 lakh to Geeta’s parents who were then pressurized into going to the police station to rescind their allegation. The case is now considered closed by the police. According to one version, Geeta’s in-laws admitted to only torturing her and claimed she took her own life.

In the absence of any sound basis for reaching a verdict, the best this panchayat could do was act on its collective conscience. Therein lies the problem. The combined conscience of a group of men told them that Rs15 lakh was an acceptable price for the life of a young woman.

Despite video evidence, Mithi police deny any such jirga took place. Because if they don’t deny it, they will have to accept the absence of their own writ. They will also have to then try to take action against the jirga participants who were allegedly led by a member of Sindh’s ruling party. Plus, even if the autopsy results are deemed accurate, there would be the matter of charging the in-laws as accessory to suicide.

Various government departments and NGOs have joined hands to curb the disturbing increase in suicides in Tharparkar by providing free psychiatric counselling and treatment to identified patients. But what good would that be when the psychosocial causes of suicides remain untended. Shouldn’t there also be simultaneous counselling for those who push women into committing suicide?

By and large, panchayats are merely stunted versions of the ‘council of wise men’ and are traditionally rigged against the interests of women. The primary purpose of their existence is to maintain the patriarchal status quo. Women are never part of these panchayats. With an actual writ of the state, these jirgas can be transformed into constructive forms of local governance. But the state carries no importance in the lives of most non-urban citizens. For them, these panchayats are the state. And so the weak suffer.

The writer is an executive producer, Geo News and editor of Jang – The Economist annual edition.

Twitter: @munazza193