**[Unsafe spaces](https://www.dawn.com/news/1764659/unsafe-spaces)**

[Shazia Nizamani](https://www.dawn.com/authors/7409/shazia-nizamani) Published July 14, 2023

VIOLENCE against women takes many forms — including rape, murder, sexual harassment, domestic violence and child and forced marriages — and is prevalent in Pakistan. Women are not safe in their homes, in public or in their workplaces. Just a few cases from the month of May, as reported in the newspapers, can help in understanding the gravity of the issue.

During the month, a father killed his 19-year-old daughter on the suspicion that she was having an affair. A young woman was shot dead by her brother in Karachi’s upscale DHA neighbourhood. A man who recently returned from Dubai killed his wife over a petty domestic dispute in Wazirabad, Punjab. A newlywed woman was shot dead by her father in City Courts, Karachi, where she had arrived to record a statement confirming that she had entered a free-will marriage. In the same month, a man opened fire at his ex-wife in City Courts Karachi after the hearing of a child custody case. In another gruesome incident, a 20-year-old woman was burnt alive in the name of ‘honour’ in Jhang, Punjab.

The National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) released a policy brief on March 8, 2023, according to which around 63,000 cases of gender-based violence (GBV) had been reported in Pakistan over the past three years, with some 4,000 being reported in the first half of 2020 when lockdowns were first imposed to curb the spread of Covid-19.

The NCHR, quoting Ministry of Human Rights data, said 80 per cent of these cases were related to domestic violence, while some 47pc pertained to domestic rape, wherein married women experienced sexual abuse. The data was based on reported cases; the actual number is feared to be much higher.

A women’s right to life and dignity must be guaranteed.

According to the US-based National Library of Medicine, only 3.2pc of women who experience domestic violence actually report it in Pakistan. In rural areas, the prevalence of physical violence against women is 56pc. In contrast, the lifetime prevalence in urban environments is 57.6pc physical, 54.5pc sexual, and 83.6pc psychological.

The UN Children’s Fund, Unicef, estimates that around 19 million girls in Pakistan are married off before the age of 18 and 4.6m before 15. Married girls are often forced into dangerous pregnancies at a young age and pregnancies that are too closely spaced. Women from religious minority communities remain particularly vulnerable to forced marriage, and very little has been done to stop child and forced marriages.

According to the Domestic Health Survey, women with higher education attainment are more likely to seek help to end violence (46pc) compared to women with no education (25pc). These statistics indicate the importance of female education in encouraging reporting of violence and abuse and seeking legal help. The data proves that there are higher chances of educated women reporting a case as they may have better knowledge of relevant laws and how to seek help from relevant legal forums.

Women generally feel discouraged from reporting incidents or filing cases due to a lack of female officers at police stations, the generally unfriendly and hostile environment in our policing system, the high fees demanded by lawyers for filing suits, and the prospect of lengthy court proceedings. A strong perception still prevails among a large section of the police and judiciary that domestic violence is a private matter and should be resolved at the family level.

Several laws on domestic violence, honour killings, harassment at workplaces and early child marriages are in place, but implementation and application of these laws remains weak or negligible. The basic challenges are addressing a lack of awareness about the relevant laws; the societal acceptance of GBV; the prevalent patriarchal mindset; lack of support from society and state in the form of shelter homes, provision of legal aid, and more; as well as the stigma attached to women who refuse to live in abusive relationships.

The existing laws need to be implemented in their true spirit by building capacity in law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, and sensitising the judiciary, lawyers, media and health professionals on GBV. There should be well-planned and well-organised awareness campaigns for the education and sensitisation of both women and men on GBV as well as on the laws made to counter it.

A grievances and redressal mechanism at the district level must be established, covering legal aid and helpline services, facilitation in complaint registration, as well as protection and rehabilitation of victims. The condition of shelter homes, particularly the Darul Amans, needs to be improved. The Constitution guarantees the right to life and dignity to citizens; women, as equal citizens of Pakistan, are entitled to the protection of these rights by the state.

*The writer is a lawyer.*

*Published in Dawn, July 14th, 2023*