[**Worthy victims**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1726093/worthy-victims)

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SOME observers have objected to the sile­nce of progressive sectors over the [alleged custodial sexual torture](https://www.dawn.com/news/1716359) of PTI Senator Azam Swati, for the offence of defaming state officials/institutions.

Certainly, there must be unequivocal condemnation of such state brutality and Swati should be unconditionally supported for exercising his right to free speech and to criticise any public official or state institution without fear of reprisal. However, the case also offers other lessons and reveals the biases and selectivity in prevailing attitudes about who qualifies as a worthy victim.

The same coterie that doubted there was an assassination attempt on Malala, despite the TTP claiming responsibility, now insists, without evidence, that there was such an [attempt on Imran Khan](https://www.dawn.com/news/1718769) by the incumbent government.

Many [defended](https://www.dawn.com/news/1630852) Khan when he blamed victims of sex crimes and reasoned that men are incited by unveiled women, but they don’t sympathise with state officials who claim to be ‘provoked’ when they are defamed.

The same patriots who saw protesters and dissidents from Balochistan and KP as traitors are now abusing the armed forces for political intervention without anxiety over national dishonour or demotivation.

This trend of double standards applies to the alleged torture of Swati and Shahbaz Gill too. It has elicited extraordinary sympathy from male supporters because of the alleged sexual nature of the punishment. If both politicians had been conventionally tortured, the outrage would be more measured.

Same-sex male sexual violation carries more prerogative for offence than routine rapes and harassments, humiliations, abuses and jokes that sexually objectify women, transwomen and non-binary people.

Pejorative attacks, sexual innuendos and memes mocking female politicians reduce their political identities to mute sexualised bodies. However, such is the gendered nature of sexual violence that while women bury their trauma in silence, for fear of male disapproval, Gill can mock the alleged offence against him by belittling the crime through humour and irony.

Stigmatised silence isolates the few women who dare to speak out, and the common response is one of disbelief or occasional pity. But when Swati and Gill speak out as male survivors, there is mass trust by men and full support by an indignant media.

All victims of sexual abuse must be equally trusted.

In the 1990s, custodial rape of women was a disturbing epidemic and rights activists campaigning against the trend were castigated as ‘anti-state’ and ‘Western feminist agents’. In 1991, Human Rights Watch found that 70 per cent of women in police custody experienced physical or sexual abuse at the hands of their jailers and that 50pc to 70pc of them were detained without due process for suspicion of sex crimes as penalised under the Hudood Ordinances.

Procedural hurdles and the impossibility of prosecuting abuses by the police extended impunity to custodial violence against women. This was possible due to discriminatory laws and the efficacious implementation of the zina laws in particular, which confirmed that men and the state were zealously committed to controlling women’s sexualities and to punishing any perceived transgression of the male-beneficial gendered and sexual orders.

Over this decade, vicious infighting weakened the political classes and undermined democratic protection of citizens’ rights. This vacuum encouraged state excesses and afforded licence to policemen and LEAs who saw women victims as easy prey and subjected them to sex crimes in police stations and jails.

All righteous men — civilians and military, liberal and conservative — need to align their biases and acknowledge that sexual violation is a crime not of ‘shame’ but of body, and that such violence threatens mental security and degrades basic dignity. The resolution for such crimes lies in redressing inequality in power relations everywhere — in the hands of state officials or men in household/communities — regardless of gender, choice of wardrobe, political affiliation or class and faith.

Without equality of power across all genders, provinces and classes — economic, social, political — violence will always be the language that fills the gaps.

Critics of the military’s politicisation or the practice of punitive torture of politicians must recognise that the abuse of state powers and discriminatory laws prevail when parties stop cooperating and enable a democracy deficit. Misogynistic biases in the military, judiciary and communities, and suspecting and blaming victims are tools that can be weaponised against all genders.

Those who blindly support Swati for partisan reasons must accept that any and all victims of alleged sex crimes — past, current and future — have to be equally trusted and supported on the same principles and grounds. Then, maybe, we can all be on the same page about sex crimes, torture, harassment and leveraging democracy rather than exacting political revenge.

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