**The forever struggle**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2021-03-17

ANYWHERE one casts a glance, women are in turmoil. Even in the year 2021, where DNA is revealing the secrets of human illness, where internet connections can allow people to communicate over thousands of miles, where we can see live images from Mars, women`s lives are as endangered, as misunderstood and as constrained as ever.

Indeed, where the lives of women, their choices, their welf are, their health are concerned, a kind of worldwide primitivism prevails. The world may be virtual but women`s physical bodies suffer in ways that men`s never do. The experience of the world, of walking down a street, of going to a shop, of enjoying the weather, of meeting a friend, all of it, each and every moment of existence is rendered somehow dangerous by the very fact of being a woman.

This year too many in Pakistan pounced on the women who dared participate in the Aurat March 2021. In a country where women are kidnapped and raped and killed without anyone batting an eyelid, this one act by women wanting to celebrate themselves was, yet again, labelled as vulgar. The organisers of the march, sadly used to getting threats every year, f aced their detractors yet again.

This year, the critics increased in number and became even more vicious and venomous. Photos from the march were photoshopped and circulated, and videos were dubbed to underscore the thinking that women have no right to occupy public space or to make their own choices and tell their own stories.

For its part, the government has chosen to speak out of both sides of the mouth. On the one hand it has launched an investigation into the march, suggesting some illicit involvement, while on the other, it says it is looking at the origin of the doctored video clips and photoshopped pictures (that tried to link the march with blasphemy) whose creators may also f ace punishment. The T TP too threatened the marchers and women. In sum, they all came together to tell those Pakistani women who want a different future that their goal was simply impossible. If Pakistani women are angry these days, theyhave goodreason tobe.

It is not just Pakistani women though. In theUnited Kingdom, thousands of women across the country defied the lockdown to protest against the killing of a young woman named Sarah Everard.

Last week, Everard had been walking home from her friend`s house after the two had dinner together, when she disappeared. Her remains were found in another part of the country and were in such a condition that she could not be immediately identified.

A police officer from the Metropolitan Police, a man who guarded diplomatic properties in London, hasbeenarrestedas asuspect.Soitisthatthevery police that is supposed to ensure that the streets of London are safe for women, had one of its ownarrested as a suspect in the murder of a young and innocent woman who was simply walking home.

In the aftermath, thousands of women from around the world have been sharing information about just how unsafe they feel in public spaces, how they are followed, harassed, stalked and subjected to catcalls just because they dare to exist.

The streets are not safe for them when there is a pandemic and the streets are not safe for them when there is none.

Over in the United States, the governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, is alleged to have sexually harassed young women in his employ. The allegations range from forcible kisses to inappropriate comments, many made in a professional venue.

Even as the number of allegations increases and more and more women emerge as having suffered harassment allegedly at the hands of the most powerful man in New York, the governor has refused toresign. He could be removed by impeachment but current counts of the votes do not show enough support to remove him from office. The lesson is simple: women suffer and men survive.

These are just some cases. The pandemic has affected men and women unequally, and the latter`s poor access to health, their inordinate burden of childcare and all sorts of other factors combine to make them even more vulnerable than they were before. At one point in time, transnational bodies like the United Nations could have been counted on as a platform where a united agenda for the safety of women could have been urged. The UN that exists sold itself long ago to the misogynistic whims of countries that have thrown money at the organisation in exchange for international leverage. The radical potential of female solidarity is no longer something that the UN seems to be interestedin.

So women everywhere are on their own, fighting alone but together. In their favour is the promise of emerging generations who bring with them new ideas about connectivity and collaboration.

Technology can help, even though it cannot be counted on as the magic solution to the victimisation of women. In addition to public marches, which are unavailable to some women owing to their f amily situation or their work situation, consumer boycotts can be added to the activist arsenal.

When male money is threatened, male behaviour is likely to change. Finally, some attention can also be paid to change among women. It is women who are the bosses of millions of domestic workers in the country. Perhaps they can sign charters that protect the dignity of those women. These sorts of actions will not solve the problems that face Pakistani women, who are made to bear the brunt of all the insecurities and inferiorities that are faced by Pakistani men, but they will make a difference. In the meantime, whether it is in Pakistan or the UK or some other place, the struggle goes on, at least for one half of the world.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

rafia.zakaria@gmail.com