**The wolves among us**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2021-08-11

THREE weeks have passed since the cruel killing of Noor Mukaddam. The accused and his suspected accomplices are in Adiala Jail, and the investigation of the accused`s movements and also his parents` alleged efforts to cover up his crime are continuing. However, despite the view that societal change is imminent, many Pakistanis have reverted to their usual misogynistic and filthy attitudes, pointing fingers at the victim and her actions.

Loathsome and shocking, these men (and some women) have taken to Twitter and Facebook and YouTube and the television channels to heap blame on the victim instead of the perpetrator. Their anger, couched in advice to young women to watch where they go, to live according to the diktats of seclusion and silence, flows like a toxic river in their veins.

And there is so much anger. There is the anger of men against a woman who dared to smile, dared to enjoy life, dared to make her own decisions. Then there is the anger of those women who can only feel better about their own lives by pointing a finger at all the women they imagine to be less godly and less connected to their faith, simply because they don`t flaunt their piety. There is also the anger of those who hate individuals who speak in English, who have more than they do; fattened by the harrowing details of the case, they feel smug as they view the suf fering of others.

It is difficult to imagine that change is possible where so many are angry and all of them are angry at women. The machinations of the suspect`s friends and family to stoke this anger is visible.

Last week, when the bail petition of Zahir Jaffer`s parents was denied, a woman in a mask appeared to hold a press conference on their behalf. The stagecraf t of this event was remarkable, laden as it was with hopes of manipulating public sentiment.

Clad in white, the woman, who identified herself as Sania Sattar, but whose identity remains in question, made all the moves designed to cosy up to those the family imagines as their allies. The conservative lobby, which is most active in maligning dead women, is prominent among them. Ms Sattarrecited Surah Al Fatiha, held up a sipara and quoted from it. Evoking her role as a mother again and again, she called every journalist in the room `beta` so that all the mothers of Pakistan could somehow be mobilised into supporting the mother of the accused.

Some have f allen for this ploy; others, like main television channels in the country, have likely been told to look the other way, pause the discussions around gender violence or taint them with the moralising of clerics who seem blithely unaware of allthe sexual crimes taking place in madressahs. How can a woman ever be blamed for going somewhere if going to a religious school is a dangerous thing? Some in the media, perhaps through the vast network of people who support the Jaffers, have refrained from focusing on the issue.

In the meantime, legal changes that would have an impact on the societal level are languishing. The Domestic Violence Bill for Islamabad Capital Territory was passed in April by the National Assembly, and later in June by the Senate. With some amendments, it was referred again to the Assembly. But the government`s parliamentary af f airs` adviser then made the controversial recommendation of sending it to the Council of Islamic Ideology for its input, stalling matters further.

If Pakistani women are insisting on justice for Noor, abusive men in the country are likely worried that domestic violence laws would indict them, and reveal how the women in their homes live in fearand anguish on a daily basis. It is not only those in the ruling circles who are reluctant to see domestic violence laws in force in Pakistan;it is also the men of the country who identify with the abusers and never the victims. It has been an uphill task for all those who have raised a voice for legislation against domestic violence in a country where half the population is female. If there is any hope, it is in the digital realm.

Apparently, friends of the Jaf fer family, after all their remonstrations claiming that they are on Noor`s side, are once again resorting to playing down the reality. Reportedly, some of them are issuing legal notices to journalists who have not stopped talking about the case. One journalist showed the legal notice he said he had received on camera and then tore it up.

The female vloggers are particular heroines here. Not only have they persisted in covering the case, their very insistence reveals how deeply they have been moved. There are millions of other women like them all over Pakistan, who know from having been educated, or having worked outside their home, that demons like the accused Zahir Jaffer are to be found everywhere in the country.

For them, punishment for the murderer is crucial and necessary because it will be at least some small deterrent to all the demons roaming free in Pakistan. It has the potential to show that the justice system, when permitted to do so, is capable of punishing murderous men.

The hope for a changed Pakistan that is not stuck in the mediaeval and dark recesses of victim blaming are dim. At the same time, one cannot emphasise how urgent the task of exposing, trying and convicting Pakistan`s femicidal maniacs and those who protect them actually is. Too many of them roam the streets, the universities, the workplaces, the malls of the country, hungry and drooling at the prospect of a new victim. One dead girlis nothing to them, but it should be everything to all of us.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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