**Women, obscenity and Imran Khan**

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No one, not even Imran Khan, the prime minister of Pakistan, can justify rape. Period. Having sex with a woman without her consent is a universal crime. Indeed, Islam mandates that parents choosing a groom for their daughter must seek her agreement before the marriage can go ahead.

A woman’s body is too precious to be given away to someone against her will. It is akin to vultures tearing the flesh from a living, breathing body. Similarly, when a woman is raped, her body becomes a virtual corpse.

When Imran Khan said that unless women dress modestly, cases of rape will keep rising, he twisted a dagger into the hearts of women in this country; the same women whose honour is routinely attached to the scarf she covers her bosom with, to the veil she puts over her face, to the shawl she wraps herself in. From vagina to toe nails, her body is an object that is supposed to be guarded. While men remain the uncontrollable beasts that need to be tamed.

I wonder what a sex worker must have felt upon listening to Imran Khan blaming women for men’s promiscuity. Is she at fault for working in one of the most demeaning professions in the world — a profession that would have become extinct had men not decided to use women for sexual satisfaction in return for money? Prostitution is a market that thrives on men’s promiscuity. These women are sold to men, taken to them, and finally given away for the right price. This something that Manto skilfully exposed when he penned “Thanda Gosht”.

When Zia-ul-Haq enforced the nefarious Qanun-e-Shahadat Order, 1984, he allowed for the admission of evidence to show whether a woman filing rape charges was “of a generally immoral character”, as well as lending less weight to a woman’s testimony than that of a man. This effectively lay the burden of proof of rape on women. We, then, saw how a blind girl had to spend years in a dark prison cell because she could not identity the men who raped her in broad daylight. It is the same today. According to the Prime Minister, women have to guard their honour behind a veil lest a man loses control, and is provoked into savaging a woman, even in front of her kids, as happened on the Lahore-Sialkot motorway.

Imran Khan was honest enough to say that the number of reported cases of rape are a fraction of actual numbers. However, he lost the argument as soon as he said that laws alone could not prevent rape or set the bar for a person’s unrestrained behaviour and that women also had to play their part.

Candour demanded, however, that he recognise how weak implementation of the law, a broken prosecution system, anachronistic law enforcement mechanisms, and a compromised judiciary have rendered laws impotent in Pakistan.

The question, therefore, remains: what are the likely implications of Imran Khan’s statement?

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One consequence could be that we witness a spike in honour killings. The culture of victim-shaming may also become strengthened. Pakistan is a country where women comprise just over 50 percent of the population, with more than half falling into 18-25 age bracket. As rising inflation thrusts an increasing number of women into the workforce, — indeed, this is already true for almost every woman belonging to a poor household — it may lead to even more incidents of harassment, as men continue to scapegoat ‘immodestly’ dressed women in order to defend their own sexual misconduct.

The Prime Minister was also worried by reports that Pakistan tops the list of most porn-searching countries, including child pornography. Yet it might be interesting to look into the reasons behind this shocking trend.

The culture of watching blue films kicked off during Zia’s era when he systematically stripped the entertainment industry, especially film and cinema, of government support by withholding funding and giving the censor board exclusive powers to curb fahashi (obscenity). Since both the Constitution and the Pakistan Penal Code are silent on the definition of vulgarity, the board was left to its raise red flags at its own discretion. As cinemas became empty, films began entering people’s bedrooms, mostly through smuggled VCRs, while the thriving video market was abuzz with the same Indian film that had been banned at the cinema. Pakistani society thus became enamoured with the noir thriller genre, which set the scene for a prolonged period of low-brow culture.

Fahashi has long been the bane of Pakistan’s culture. Ironically, the more we wanted to get rid of it — the more resilient it has become. Not because of any great love for it but because of a skewered approach to eliminating it once and for all.

Decorum, including at the intellectual level, is the best antidote to vulgarity. Unless we promote high culture through scholarly debate and discussion on all issues, including vulgarity, we shall remain trapped in a vicious circle whereby we place the blame on the most vulnerable, while the number of rape cases rises unabated.

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