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Media briefing: Violence against women in Pakistan

"The government of Pakistan vigorously condemns the practice of so-called honour killings. Such acts do not find a place in our religion or law. Killing in the name of honour is murder and will be treated as such." General Pervez Musharraf, April 2000

Introduction

Women in Pakistan are severely disadvantaged and discriminated against. Violence against women in the home and community as well as in the custody of law enforcement officials is on the rise. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) found that in 2000 a woman was raped every two hours, and that hundreds were victims of "honour" killings, domestic violence, burnings and murder.

While a few positive changes have taken place over the last couple of years, the government is still failing to protect women from these abuses.

Many cases receive media attention and the involvement of human rights organizations, but they are quickly forgotten. Other women suffer abuses in silence for years, die violent deaths and get buried in unmarked graves.

Women's awareness of their rights has increased thanks to the work of Pakistani women's rights groups. However most women remain ignorant of even their most basic rights. A newspaper survey in 2000 reported that almost 90% of women did not realise that they had any rights at all.

In its fifth report on women in Pakistan, Amnesty International summarizes the current government's commitments to uphold women's rights, describes cases of abuses in the community, in the home and in custody and the failure of the criminal justice system. The report also sets out recommendations.

Family and community

Domestic violence, which includes physical abuse, rape, acid throwing, burning and killing, is widespread in Pakistan. Few women would complain under legal provisions relating to physical injury. For those who do take the step, police and the judiciary usually dismiss their complaints and send them back to their abusive husbands.

Very poor women, women from religious minorities and women bonded labourers are particularly vulnerable to violence in the community and home.

According to the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, over 90% of married women report being kicked, slapped, beaten or sexually abused when husbands were dissatisfied by their cooking or cleaning, or when the women had 'failed' to bear a child or had given birth to a girl instead of a boy. Another organization stated that one woman is murdered and one woman is kidnapped in Pakistan every day.

- The case of Shukria

On 22 October 2001, Sharif in village Goharpur, Sheikhpura district, Punjab province, tied his wife Shukria's wrists and ankles with rope, poured kerosene over her and with the help of his mother and sister set her on fire. The couple had been married for ten years. As they remained childless, Sharif wanted to marry another woman but Shukria did not agree to this. Neighbours tried to rescue Shukria but she died shortly afterwards in hospital.

Women continue to die painful deaths in so-called "stove burn" accidents in the kitchen. The HRCP estimates that less than 20% of deaths lead to arrests and most suspects are released within days.

Acid-throwing is on the increase. Acid burns do not usually kill but result in hideous disfigurement and suffering, destruction of self-esteem, and confine women to the home. The government has done little to restrict the sale of acid or to punish those who use it to injure women.

Forced marriage of young girls continues to be reported despite a legal minimum age of 16. While slavery is illegal in Pakistan, girls and women continue to be traded to settle debts or conflicts. In Sukkur in 2000, a six-year-old girl was married to a 60-year-old man when her family was unable to repay a debt. According to newspaper reports the marriage was consummated and the little girl screamed loudly for hours after the rape.

A form of forced marriage specific to the interior of Sindh province is the "marriage" of girls and women to the Qur'an. This keeps the woman's share of property in the family as she will have no children to pass it on to. Human rights organizations report that there are currently over 5000 women married to the Qur'an in Sindh.

Pakistan is both a country of origin and a transit country for the trafficking of women for domestic labour, forced marriage and prostitution. This form of slavery is organized by crime networks that span South Asia.

The open sale of girls and women in markets is reported in underdeveloped areas such as parts of Balochistan.

Some women, both local and trafficked, are killed if they refuse to earn money in prostitution. Some are forced into prostitution by their husbands. Journalist Sufi Mohammad Khan from Badin, Sindh, was killed on 2 May 2001 after reporting extensively about trafficking in drugs and women in the Tharparkar area of Sindh which happened with the connivance of apathetic authorities. He reported that some 70 women have been kidnapped in Sindh and Punjab, detained by the Arbab feudal family and forced into prostitution. The journalist was bribed and threatened by members of the family.

"Honour" killings

"Honour" killings are carried out by men who assume that their wives, daughters or sisters have in some way contravened norms relating to the behaviour of women which reflect on and damage a man's "honour". Often the grounds for such assumptions can be very flimsy and amount to nothing

more than a suspicion about a woman's fidelity. Men are also known to have felt shamed if "their" women seek divorce or become the victims of rape.

The exact number of "honour" killings is impossible to ascertain as many go unreported. Media and human rights organizations estimate that three women are murdered each day. In 2000, the HRCP recorded over 1000 "honour" killings in Punjab alone. Prosecution of "honour" killings is lax and only a few men have been convicted.

In the higher levels of government and the judiciary, "honour" killings are recognised as a serious problem. The government of Pakistan has condemned "honour" killings as murder and a seminar in Karachi in April 2001 looked at problems of redress in "honour" crime cases. However no action has followed and "honour" killings continue to be reported daily.

-- In December 2000, three brothers overpowered their sister-in-law, Anila, sprinkled kerosene on her clothes and set her on fire in a village near Sukkur when they suspected her of infidelity. Her father rescued her and took her to hospital where, with 85% burns, she died.

-- In early 2001, Mir Afzal cut off the nose of his wife Amroz Khatoon in Karachi as he suspected her of infidelity. He then attempted to kill her but neighbours alerted by the noise interceded. Police arrested the man and his accomplices but Amroz Khatoon has received threats to her life if she pursues her complaint.

-- In March 2001, a 60-year-old widow, Hidayat Khatoon, and 55-year-old Baksh Ali were killed by the widow's son in Chandan village, district Sukkur. When the son surrendered to police, he said that he had been teased by villagers over his mother's alleged affair and had therefore killed both.

-- In July 2001, 16-year-old Shoukat Labano in Sukkur district, shot dead his mother Rahima (33) when he suspected her of an affair.

Increasingly "honour" killings involve not only the woman but several other family members. In November 2000, Mohammed Umar Magsi killed his 11-year-old daughter with an axe because he suspected her of having an affair. When his wife and younger daughter tried to intervene, he killed them as well. On 8 January 2001, Riaz Ahmed axed to death his wife, three daughters and two sons, because he suspected his wife of adultery. On 16 January 2002, Jamal threw hand grenades into his father-in-law's house when his wife refused to return to him, killing five of her relatives and injuring eight.

The HRCP has observed that increasingly young boys are forced to attack or kill sisters who are opposed to a forced marriage. Afterwards the boys are formally pardoned by their fathers which allows them to go free.

The emergence of "fake honour" killings is a worrying new trend. There is a pattern of men accusing their wives of being dishonourable with wealthy men purely for financial gain. The wife is declared "kari" (black woman, one who brings shame) and is killed. The suspected man is made to pay off the husband and he is "pardoned".

In a few cases, women have begun to resist violence in the name of "honour". A young woman escaped death when she fought her husband. The local landlord held a jirga (tribal council) which established her innocence and asked the husband to apologise and take her back.

Women who marry men of their own choice are often seen to damage their family's "honour"; they are frequently detained by their parents, forcibly married to someone else, threatened, humiliated, assaulted or killed. If a couple marry in court against the will of their parents, and the parents challenge the union, they can be charged with "illicit" sexual relations under the Zina Ordinance (which prohibits sex outside marriage). Newly-weds are advised to have their marriage confirmed by a magistrate and seek shelter with friends for some time. In many cases families accept the fact of marriage but sometimes their sense of shame is not appeased. Robina and Khushi Mohammad were killed in May 2000 by Robina's uncle and two brothers over two years after their wedding -- they had been in hiding but had finally returned to the husband's home.

Custodial violence

Physical abuse of women in custody continues to be rife in Pakistan. Despite promises of police reform, police continue to use torture to intimidate, harass and humiliate detainees to extract money or information. Women are subjected to gender-specific abuses including sexual harassment, public undressing and parading, and rape. Conditions of detention for women are also of grave concern.

State inaction

In April 2000, President Musharraf made a range of commitments to protect women's rights. Since then, there have been many positive signals and pronouncements but little effective change.

The authorities are often aware of a series of abuses and do not intervene. Some officials prevent women from accessing the criminal justice system and seeking redress.

Some court judgments over the past year-and-a-half have adequately protected women's rights while others have treated women as a man's property. This inconsistency indicates that the law is not being equally applied and the gender bias of individual judges is determining whether a woman is protected or not.

Police confronted with complaints of domestic violence are known to refuse to register the complaint, to humiliate the victim or to have advised the battered woman to return home. Even the staff of state women's shelters frequently advise women to accept reconciliation and return home.

Conviction rates for rape are very low. Police rarely respond adequately as they side with local people with influence who are involved in the crime. Women frequently don't seek redress out of shame but also because of the possibility of being accused of Zina if they cannot establish absence of consent.

Recommendations

Amnesty International's report makes recommendations which are well within the powers of the Government of Pakistan to implement and do not require a huge investment of resources. They do require political will and the determination that violence against women is unacceptable and cannot be allowed to continue.

However, underlying the abuses suffered by women is a discrimination perpetuated by society as a whole. In this regard, everyone has a role to play –government, political parties,

religious groups, all elements of civil society and individuals. Everyone has a responsibility to commit themselves to the equality of all human beings, irrespective of gender.

The recommendations include:

- The government should clearly and publicly condemn all acts of violence against women. It should develop policies and disseminate materials to promote women's safety in the home and community and in detention.

- The government should prohibit all acts of violence against women and establish legal protection. It should review existing laws, including the Zina law and the qisas and diyat law.

- Investigate all allegations of violence against women and prosecute and punish those found to be responsible.

For a copy of the report please visit Report: www.web.amnesty.org/ai.nsf/index/asa330062002

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