I got flowers today
Today was a very special day;
It was the day of my funeral.

Last night, he finally killed me,
He beat me to death.
If only I had gathered enough courage
and strength to leave him,
I would not have gotten flowers…today.

We all remember the barbaric footage of the Taliban in Pakistan flogging a young girl in public back in 2009. We also all remember the months of debate on whether the flogging video was authentic or not. However, what happened to Chand Bibi in Swat was by no means unique. The Taliban are not the only ones brutalizing women in Pakistan. According to a Human Rights Watch report, it is estimated that up to 90% of women are victims of domestic violence in the country where in one out of every three households there is violence against women. This violence takes the form of beating, torture, rape, burning, confinement and even murder. And the issue of domestic violence does not stop here.

The United Nations defines violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. Gender-based violence continues to pose a major roadblock to women’s human rights, peace and development across the globe. In many countries one out of every two women is subjected to domestic violence in the form of sexual, emotional and physical violence.

Dowry-related violence, rape and marital rape, female genital mutilation, forced prostitution, feticide, infanticide, honor killings, sati (widow-burning), acid-throwing crimes and women trafficking continue to ruin the lives of many women around the world. Unfortunately, in spite of several legal mechanisms and national policies on violence against women, these continue to fail to protect them due to lack of implementation, the prevailing social attitude that violence against women is a private domestic issue, and deeply rooted patriarchal values and norms. And the situation gets only worse in developing societies like ours in South Asia, where the victims are trapped in the name of social norms and cultural values and where individual independence for a female is a taboo.
Say no to domestic violence

Written by Huma Iqbal
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The topic comes under much review on November 25 every year, after the United Nations designated it as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. This date came from the brutal assassination in 1960, of the three Mirabal sisters, political activists in the Dominican Republic, on orders of Dominican ruler Rafael Trujillo, and was later taken up by women activists in 1981.

The United Nations’ in-depth study on all forms of violence against women, issued in October 2006 at the 51st session of the General Assembly, confirmed that violence against women is a widespread and gross violation of human rights prevalent in all countries and socio-economic levels of society. It also drew attention to the fact that violence against women is not the result of random, individual acts of misconduct, but rather is deeply rooted in structural relationships of inequality between women and men.

Within South Asia violence against women in the family ranges from a broad arena of injustice and includes domestic violence, marital rape, harmful traditional practices, sex-selective abortions, infanticide, honor killings, forced early marriage and bride price. Violence occurring within the community, such as sexual harassment and violence at the workplace, in schools and in sporting activities remains an issue that is often considered too insignificant to warrant action. While smuggling and trafficking of women and girls, femicide (the gender-based killing of a woman), rape, abductions, forced marriages and forced impregnation or transmission of HIV are not sufficiently investigated, they are seldom subjected to criminal law enforcement processes and often go unreported and enjoy impunity.

Violence is an inescapable reality of women’s lives in South Asia, where one in every two women faces violence in her home and where the social customs and attitudes that support violence against them are entrenched and institutionalized at all levels – home, family, community, society, and the State. Breaking the silence on this violence is not an easy, or even a real option for most women, where to do so would threaten their lives. The pervasive culture of gender-based violence in South Asia has therefore eroded women’s fundamental rights to life, health, security, bodily integrity, political participation, food, work, and shelter. It also explains the uniformly poor gender-related development indices in crucial sectors like health, nutrition, education, political participation, and employment. According to Oxfam, there are 50 million fewer women in South Asia today than there should be – girl babies are killed before birth through sex-selective abortions, or die prematurely through violence and neglect.

This Missing Women phenomenon is further highlighted in the United Nations Development
Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report 2003 which exposes how women in this region remain deeply vulnerable and disadvantaged; indicators for literacy, health, economic activities, work burden, empowerment, and political participation are among the lowest in the world. A recent World Bank regional brief for South Asia reinforces the message that women are in crisis; stating that 56 per cent of South Asian women are illiterate, and one third of all maternal deaths in the world occur in this region.

Whatever small gains that have been made across the region in improving access to health care, nutrition or education are being rapidly eroded through other forms of discrimination. One such example is of sex-selective abortions in India. Compared with the normal ratio of about 95 girls being born per 100 boys, there were 92.7 girls born per 100 boys in 2007, and in some states such as Punjab and Gujarat, the ratio of girls is as low as 79.3 and 87.8. This already distorted sex ratio for children below the age of six is predicted to worsen across the region.

It is often at the hands of male relatives that a woman undergoes violence. According to the Ansar Burney Trust, in the vast majority of cases where women lost their lives as a result of violence at home, it was their husbands and in-laws who were to blame; while at other times it was the victims’ brothers and fathers.

Most countries in South Asia today, including India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have legislation against domestic violence. In Pakistan, though the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Bill was unanimously passed by the National Assembly in 2009, it died an unsung death even before it could become a law. However, mere presence of legislation is not the solution to the problem. Drawing violence against women out of the private domain into public attention and the arena of State accountability is a formidable task. We, as a society need to challenge and change existing social and individual attitudes that accept violence against women as normal. There is also a need to mobilize all sections of the family, community, and society to act to prevent violence against women; to build popular pressure on the State to formulate and implement gender-equitable policies and to bring together diverse local, national, regional, and international efforts working towards ending violence against women.

A mother’s lap is said to be the best cradle for her child. We need to ensure that our future generations are not deprived of this warmth.

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