

Addressing the Global Pandemic of Violence Against Women

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Background

Violence against women and girls (VAW&G) is a grave violation of fundamental human rights.¹ It is a major global, public health issue that violates autonomy and hinders development. VAW&G is now a global pandemic being endemic in every country, culture and social strata; causing deliberate harm to millions of women and their families.¹ VAW&G is devastatingly pervasive and starts at an alarmingly young age with reports of sexual abuse of girls as young as six months.^{1,2} At times may start in utero with female feticide. VAW&G can take many forms –from domestic violence to trafficking, sexual abuse to child marriage, genital mutilation to femicide. The perpetrator usually is someone closely known to the family. Violence not only affects women's physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health adversely, but also has negative impact on family, society and country. VAW has tremendous financial impact, due to greater health care and legal expenses, reduced productivity; resulting in lesser national budget and overall development of the nation.³

Magnitude of the problem

According to World Health Organization (WHO) estimates, globally 1 in 3 (30%) women in their lifetime are subjected to physical or sexual violence.² These statistics have remained unchanged for the last decade. The most affected are from Low and middle income countries (LMIC).²

COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated women's exposure to violence, as a result of lockdowns, more time at home with abusers, rising stress, limited access to health facilities and disruptions to vital support services. Domestic violence has

emerged as a shadow pandemic showing a massive global rise during COVID-19 lockdown [4,5]. Unlike COVID-19, we don't have a vaccine for violence against women!

Situation in Pakistan

Cases of gender-based violence (GBV) and VAW are grossly under reported in Pakistan. Thousands of women who face violence remain missing from the statistics. The crime is never reported because the offender is usually from the family; it becomes an issue of honor. Everyday social media and news print reports 2 to 3 cases of VAW. According to estimates in November 2020 by White Ribbon Alliance, 60 to 70 percent of women in Pakistan face violence and abuse at some stage of their life. Around 5,000 women are killed every year while thousands become disabled because of domestic violence. Pakistan has witnessed several cases of GBV in the past few months highlighting the enormity of the problem. Problem of VAW in Pakistan is growing and has assumed epidemic proportions, impossible to ignore. In Pakistan violence against women (VAW) is both a crime and a socially accepted norm. Despite minimal improvements in gender-specific legislation in Pakistan, violence against women hasn't declined in fact it's on the rise. Patriarchal Culture, poor parenting, lack of basic life skills, little or no respect for women and weak implementation of laws promote VAW. While there is widespread rhetoric about the pivotal role of women in the development of a nation; laws aiming to protect women; separate ministries for women development; but when it comes to effectively protecting women against violence rooted in patriarchy, the same authorities are either apathetic, complicit or drag the court proceedings to an extent that it becomes redundant.

Pakistan has several laws and policies against various forms of violence. Implementation of the policy remains a challenge. Women are denied the basic right to education, inheritance and choosing their life partner. Most of acid throwing incidents take place as

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a revenge of refusal to marriage proposal or illicit relationship, leaving the women scarred forever.⁶ Many women lack access to free or affordable essential services in health, police, justice and social support so as to ensure their safety.⁷ In Pakistan the triangular alliance between patriarchy, ignorance and illiteracy has prevented any meaningful rights-based strategy to address VAW&G.

Solutions

25th November is the International day for elimination for VAW is nearing and we are far from the goal. Reported gender equality indicators, are abysmal and suggest we won't be able to achieve SDG target to end VAW. System has failed to deliver justice to the abused, opening the path for more abuse incidents. We need to accelerate our actions. Short-term, quick-fix solutions, suo moto actions, politicians and rights activists' verbal solidarity with the victims and condemnations will never prevent recurrence of the incidents. Using the human rights based approach, deep rooted sustained efforts are required by the policy makers, government, society, communities, health sector, judiciary and individuals to promote a societal attitudinal change, fostering respect for women and improved access to medical and social services to women.^{7,8}

Following areas need to be strengthened.

1. Policy and Laws- There needs to be stronger leadership and political will to develop, review, institute and implement policies, strategies, laws and regulations that address to end violence against women and promote gender equality (equitable access to education, pay, property/ inheritance rights). Government should invest in capacity building of all service providers (health, judiciary and education). VAW survivor help facilities to be established in health care facilities and included in essential services in times of disaster and crisis. Introduce easily accessible user friendly Women Safety Phone Apps and help lines. Adopt measures to end poverty; promote education and empower women, make women aware of their right to access quality health services State must enforce its laws with accountability. Judicial and police officers who are negligent in their duties towards preventing VAW should be held accountable.

2. Data Collection: Solutions require an acknowledgement of the problem, and openness to discovering uncomfortable truths about ourselves and others. There is a dire need to strengthen data

collection, reporting and documentation for records. Investing in high-quality surveys on VAW will help determine prevalence and cause paving the way for elimination of VAW.

3. Health Sector - The health care professionals (HCPs) have the unique opportunity of being the first ones with whom the victims come in contact. Health sector plays a pivotal role in the care of VAW survivors, by providing comprehensive health care to women subjected to violence and as an entry point for identification of the need to refer women to other support services such as shelter, legal and social support they may need.⁹ There is a need to train and strengthen the capacity of HCP to identify, examine, offer first line support and medical treatment to survivors of VAW, identify survivor needs, establish referral linkages and respond in a caring and sensitive way.

VAW needs to be included in the curricula of all health care providers-in under graduate training as well as specialist training of obstetrician gynecologists and in continuing education programs for all HCPs.⁹

4. Society: Communities and society have an important role in transforming attitudes, beliefs, and norms to respect women, end VAW&G. As a whole, we need to promote education, respectful relationships and awareness about their rights. Boys need to be reared to respect women and children. The victims need to be taught that violence is intolerable and must be reported. Respect for women to be inculcated from the beginning in homes, communities, work-place and society at large. Discourage attitudes that discriminate against women and girls, especially regarding the acceptability of violence against women, through school- and community based programs and interventions.^{9,10} Art of parenting needs to be addressed.¹¹ Support and scale up national programs and strategies for prevention. Strengthen prosecution and documentation.^{7,9,10,11}

Violence against women and girls cannot be justified and must stop.¹⁰ Reflecting on the injustices meted out to women, the state should demonstrate its responsibility by not just punishing the perpetrators but develop strategies to reform the system. Let's all become agents of change and nurture a society which promotes gender equality, respectful relationships, equitable & inclusive communities, work places and institutions. **Remember “Violence against women & girls is preventable.”**

We can turn the tide, change the narrative and create societies where VAW is unthinkable.

Conflict of Interest None

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