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## **Pakistan: The trauma of rape - “Time has come to think of measures that address the issue at the sociological and mental health level”**

Wednesday 30 October 2013, by [MUSTAFA Zubeida](#) (Date first published: 30 October 2013).

DO we have increasing incidents of rape in Pakistan? Recently a large number of cases were reported of young women — even little girls — being assaulted by men. Some were brutally murdered. There has been an outcry from some women’s groups but the government has remained silent.

The Women’s Action Forum (WAF), which was born in 1981 as a reaction to the punishment announced against a young couple under the Hudood Ordinances, has generally been quick to take note of rape cases. In fact War Against Rape (WAR) was created in 1989 as an offshoot to address this devastating crime.

As a first measure in quest of solutions, WAF organised earlier this month a roundtable at Szabist, the educational institute, with the idea of creating awareness among the youth so that they also get involved in a movement to confront rape.

The event was certainly informative and therefore thought-provoking. It is important that people should be aware of the medico-legal, administrative and attitudinal barriers faced by rape survivors in procuring justice.

Those who spoke at the roundtable knew the subject well — be it the WAF and WAR activists, the lawyer, the police officer, the journalist or the CPLC chief. It was an excellent idea to enlighten the audience by having them listen to these presentations.

The inevitable question that followed was “then what?” Anis Haroon, who has been an integral part of the women’s movement, pointed out that the incidence of sexual violence in Pakistan in 2012 was up 17pc over the previous year. She also spoke about the state’s tolerance of violence against women.

Hence the need for a strategy to pressure the stakeholders, especially the police, to prioritise cases of violence against women, which include rape. There was talk about providing immediate support to rape survivors and setting up a cell within the CPLC. Such approaches are not new.

Sarah Zaman, the director of WAR, says that in 2010 WAR had produced a policy document detailing the protocols of standard operating procedures for providing medical-legal care to rape survivors. But nothing has come out of this exercise.

Is it surprising? Can one successfully focus on only sex-related crimes in a society where robbers, extortionists and murderers are allowed to roam free? Violence against women has to be seen in a

holistic context. What lawyer Faisal Siddiqi said at the roundtable is the crux of the issue which we have known all along but prefer to turn a blind eye to.

According to him new laws will not bring about any improvement because the state's criminal justice system has collapsed and it lacks the capacity to protect women. This is also the conclusion of activists who have been working on other fronts, such as deweaponisation and the right to information.

Anis Haroon challenged Siddiqi's contention saying that changes in the law had helped the victims of Hudood Ordinances, but it is difficult to believe that stringent laws by themselves will eliminate rape. Deterrent steps deter a criminal only if they actually produce results and that is possible only if there is a strong criminal justice system in place.

Hence strengthening the support system for rape survivors should be the first priority. The need is to empower women by creating awareness — as the roundtable was intended to do — but one event is not enough.

There is also the need to focus on the support measures and counselling for rape survivors. The quest for an ideal solution must continue but not at the expense of social measures that can be more helpful initially.

The survivor needs help to overcome her devastating trauma. She must be helped back to her feet by empowering her.

Reading the book *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* by *New York Times'* popular columnist, Nicholas Kristof, and Sheryl WuDunn, I realised that the problem of rape is serious and widespread in many African countries as well.

According to the authors, "21pc of Ghanaian women reported in one survey that their sexual initiation was by rape, 17pc of Nigerian women said that they had endured rape or attempted rape by the age of 19 and 31pc of South African women reported that they had been raped by the age of 15". What is heartening is that the survivors have started resisting and are refusing to submit to humiliation and despondency. Support groups have mushroomed to reassure survivors that they are not to blame and to help rehabilitate them.

This has been possible because the issue of rape has become the subject of a public discourse to warn people about the gravity of the problem. We have our Mukhtaran Mai as an example of how a rape survivor can overcome her own trauma and go on to make a change.

There is also the need for preventive measures. Discretion demands that girls should be counselled to take precautions such as avoiding solitary places and moving in groups. This is certainly a wiser approach than being rash.

There is also the need to set up neighbourhood watch systems which organise the mohalla people for their own security. Some countries have turned to martial arts training for women to teach them techniques to protect themselves.

Rapes will still take place but the time has come to think of measures that address the issue at the sociological and mental health level.

**Zubeida Mustafa**

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\* <http://www.zubeidamustafa.com/the-trauma-of-rape#more-2598>