

OP-ED: Wives Mute While Rape Speaks

By Breyah Atkinson

“Operator, I was just raped, I need medical assistance and the police. Yes, I know the rapist. He’s my husband.” In the middle of the night, a young woman wakes up to sense a pill dissolving in her mouth, but she has no recollection of taking one. Another night, she wakes up and her clothes are completely stripped from her body; however, she does not recall removing them. Things do not make sense. We can see this scenario as a rape scene, but because the rapist is her husband, she is confused by her feelings of violation.

Many countries do not acknowledge marital rape as a crime. In Pakistan, marriage is under the control and domination of husband through sex, violence, and decision-making. Under both Islamic law and local honor codes in Pakistan, men are expected because of their strength and judgment to control vulnerable females who are thought to be unable to have autonomy and whose bad behaviors might compromise family honor. For example, many think when women venture outside the house, she is welcomed by the devil.

Women must be obedient to their husbands. The Quran, which is a central religious text of Islam, says, “Males are in charge of women.” The Quran is interpreted differently, so for many, the text could mean if a man is in charge of his wife, physically and sexually leading to the justification of marital rape as violence against women. When domestic violence is part of a relationship, the chances of spousal rape occurring rise by 70%.

Violence against women has become a social norm. One researcher wrote that in Pakistan, domestic violence is considered a private matter, as it occurs in the family, and therefore not an appropriate focus for assessment, intervention, or policy changes. It is said that there are approximately 70-90% of domestic violence cases that involve women in Pakistan. However, spousal abuse, including marital rape, is never considered unless it involves murder. Religious and gender oppression is a serious disadvantage for women of Pakistan and it cannot be tolerated any longer. Society fails to acknowledge that marriage does not imply consent to sex.

There’s a significant imbalance of power in Pakistani society which can lead men to justify extreme behaviors in the name of protecting family honor. Recently, it has been practiced for male family members to punish women who violate norms by throwing acid on them or killing them in what the culture terms, “honor killings.”

Numerous studies have concluded that women from religious backgrounds are more likely to accept spousal rape because they fear being labeled a “sinner,” being divorced or having a spouse that commits adultery. On many accounts, wives in Pakistan have complained of contracting STDs from adulterous husbands, but feel it is their duty to continue to have relations and please their husbands.

In order to control domestic violence in Pakistan, three public health intervention tactics have been adopted:

- Primary prevention: awareness programs. WAR (War Against Rape) is one of the only organizations in Pakistan, that is dedicated to bringing awareness and advocating for rape justice. (<http://www.war.org.pk>).
- Secondary prevention: focuses on instant response to violence, such as care before accessing to hospitals, and providing psychiatric support for issues such as depression.
- Tertiary prevention: focuses on long-term care for victims such as rehabilitation centers.

Although these interventions are plausible solutions, rape in general is not recognized on a national level and that has to change. Women in countries such as Pakistan and Iraq are often overlooked and shamed. Women should be provided the support and courage to fight against misogyny and brutality.

The Pakistani government has considered the issue of marital rape, but no progression has occurred. Women and men should be educated on this issue. There needs to be continuous pressure on the Pakistani government to enforce laws that will protect women from being abused as well as punish the abusers without shaming the victims.

There needs to be more opportunity for employments and for participation in political organizations for women. Governments should incorporate programs in health facilities, homes, and jobs about the importance of awareness of domestic and sexual violence. Specifically, programs that support women through abuse and trauma, and provide them with resources to feel safe and secure.

Lastly, there should be clarity of religious definitions of basic rights for women. Women deserve autonomy and authority, and these concepts are often lost when interpreted. It starts with us, and it doesn't end until this change occurs for women across the world.

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