

Dowry violence: Surviving with stigmas

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(Edited text of a presentation made at the Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy, 25 February 2014)

Respected guests of honour, human rights heroes, sheroes, mentors, friends, colleagues, ladies & gentlemen, good morning. I would begin with a most sincere 'Thanks' to my host UN Watch, for giving me this privilege of speaking with you as a survivor. Abuses and violence against the weak are prevalent in almost all countries and societies, and mine [Pakistan] is no exception. In the arena of human and women's rights, Pakistan is riddled with confusion, contrast and conflict. We can reflect more on the status of women and girls in general, and some unique women in particular, later in the session, but to comprehend multilayered violence in the life of a Pakistani woman, my personal experience might be meaningful.

My parents were forced to experience two traumatic migrations. As a child and teenager, I silently tolerated (as the only option then) from a revered figure in the family what I later realized was nothing but child sexual and emotional abuse. Becoming a medical doctor was my childhood dream. In spite of many hardships and emotional baggage, I was able to obtain my degree in medicine. Although my dream was to be a cardiologist, I could not transform that part into reality. An arranged marriage was instead placed on my cards. Arranged is the polite expression for forced marriage. My highly qualified father was not ready to spend further on my education, and marriage was a better option than a post graduate degree.

I was married not to live happily thereafter, but to endure different shades of human behaviour. The dowry that I took with me was equivalent in monetary worth to the fees of my studies at the Royal College of Physicians in the UK (had I been destined to study there) but could not match the expectations of my greedy in-laws. Maybe I am unfair in labelling them greedy. Actually they acted like most of the pragmatic and conformist in-laws. I further embittered them by failing to become simultaneously a money making clinician, a perfect housekeeper and a submissive wife enduring an adulterous weekend husband who wanted a wife only for sexual pleasure. I can still recall that I had to oblige him to get cold drinking water which I was not entitled to, as my dowry did not contain a refrigerator.

Let me pause my own story for a while and explain here that dowry is not limited to the "gift items" given by the bride's family at the time of marriage, and dowry violence is not limited to extreme and fatal forms of abuse such as kitchen stove deaths and bride burning. When a gift becomes a demand, it is a form of violence, and the spectrum of dowry violence has embedded in it psychosocial abuses, harmful cultural practices like child marriages, exchange marriages, denial of inheritance and so forth. Each year in South Asian communities, thousands of young brides lose their lives over dowry disputes. They are burnt, killed or mutilated by husbands and in-laws whose material demands remain unfulfilled. Religions including Islam have always been interpreted and applied in favour of men and power structures. Thus, it is not surprising to notice that dowry is prevalent in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Nepal - the patriarchal belt of Asia and in SA diaspora.

Reverting back to my story, my brief married life was thus a tapestry of ordeals of dowry violence. My physical abuses, emotional distress and psychological damages were all too normal, too usual, too

customary and too acceptable for all witnesses. I had to conceive against my will while my marriage was sinking. I tried to seek the help of leading gynecologists and obstetricians, some of whom had been my teachers. Most of them "counselled" me to go ahead with the pregnancy 'as the child would bridge the gap between us, and marriage was the most important part of an honourable woman's life'. Those who accepted to help me asked for my husband's consent in terminating the pregnancy. I ended finally as a divorcee when the ultrasound revealed that I was bearing a girl child. Let me rephrase: I ended as a bad divorced woman from the point of view of conventional morality guarded equally by the educated and otherwise. I had to fight to get divorced. (In 2011 I wrote a book about those Pakistani women who are divorced, divorced mothers, disabled or never married, above the age of 40. If you wish, I can tell you about the status of divorced women and mothers in the Q&A session).

From that point till today, my life followed and is still following a rocky pathway as a self made, fairly stubborn human rights defender, a divorced mother of a daughter, who wants to live with dignity and equality without the push of the social class and pull of networking with power elites. Until my mid thirties, I faced many expressions of manipulation and unwanted interest in urban, modern and educated settings. I am still accused of not being able to pull off a successful married life because of my inability to please a man, cook efficiently and make money like most of the lady doctors in my country. Seen from a distance I appear a successful woman; by no means do I look or sound like a "victim", because victims are usually poor, illiterate, young and frail. I appeared so strong that nobody realized I was suffering. It was only when I approached my 30s, did I gather the inner courage to start disclosing a little about my life. It took me another 10 years to disclose my exploitation as a child.

From a victim to a survivor, I have learnt the following things:

Symptomatic violence like acid burns, chopped nose, rape injuries gain attention and are easy to understand but subtle forms of violence are difficult to explain. Dowry has to be recognized as a form of violence against women and girls, as well as gender based violence. It directly influences the status of a girl child even at the prenatal stage, and deeply impacts her life further if she survives.

Any victim of violence is less hurt and disturbed by her or his experience, but more disturbed, shocked and at times completely shattered by the silence of their state, system, society and even family. The wounds inflicted on the soul are much more difficult to heal than those on flesh and bones.

In practice, justice is not accessible to all Pakistani citizens equally, because of the low level of literacy, particularly legal literacy, the lack of awareness of one's rights and the patriarchal mindset within justice institutions themselves. Furthermore, approaching the judiciary through a lawyer is expensive in terms of time, effort and finances.

I am luckier than a vast majority of women worldwide in that I was able to make a choice: most disadvantaged women have two choices, to enjoy the convenience of subordination, or to pay the price of empowerment. I chose to pay the price of empowerment.

You may be wondering how such abuse could happen in the life of an educated activist. While there is no doubt that education empowers, at the same time it takes away raw courage. In my experience, urban, middle class educated women are loathe to disclose or discuss violence in their lives. They are also quite aware of the absence of any support mechanisms, which further cements their silence.

The reason I am here to share all this, is that dowry violence and its consequences remain buried in the sacred sphere of domestic violence, shrugged off as a private matter in which personal choices and attitudes are to be blamed. NO. No violence is a private matter. What an individual or family do is their personal choice, but the response of legal, medical and public service sectors is certainly not a private matter. A state must safeguard the choices and rights of its citizens, including women and girls.

While tricky, this issue merits a priority position in the context of Pakistan, where marriage is a compulsory institution, and where religion and culture are not only mixed up but selectively applied to harm women and girls.

I share my story in the hopes of seeing structured lobbying for serious legislative action in Pakistan, where even today fathers kill their daughters, girls hang themselves and many new brides meet "accidental kitchen deaths" because of dowry systems. Dowry demand, dowry acceptance, dowry offering and lavish weddings are in fact strong proxy indicators of the deteriorating mental health and moral standards of our society. Dowry is a unique and forgotten form of violence in Pakistan, endorsed in the name of tradition and legally sanctioned, thus making the lives of millions of people miserable and traumatic.

We, the victims and survivors of dowry systems in Pakistan need the support of the international community, because unlike most other forms of violence against women and gender based violence, dowry violence can be prevented through strong legislation, effective implementation and a gender-sensitive judiciary. The international community can make a difference in the lives of millions of families in Pakistan in general and women and girls in particular, by:

- Building a correct understanding of the magnitude and cost of this violence
- Assisting us in devising mechanisms to document dowry-based violence cases and sensitizing mass communication media, all of which would help in further processing the issue
- Assisting in providing psychosocial counseling and legal assistance to the victims, thus helping them become survivors
- Prioritizing dowry violence in elite and high profile forums and agendas
- Pressuring the Pakistani government to enact a legislation against the crime of dowry violence.

My daily struggle is based on the hope that one day all women will enjoy all their rights in Pakistan, while victims of violence and divorced women would live happily and with dignity—without any stigma. Let stigma remain a beautiful part of the flowers, not ugly spots for the victims and survivors of human rights abuses, including dowry violence.

Thank you.

[Footnote text for first page] Ashoka fellow Dr. Rakhshinda Perveen is a recognized gender expert, researcher, author and poet. More information about her and her work can be found at: <http://creativeangerbyrakhshi.com/index.html>