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## Criminal silence

Shazia Nizamani | Published June 13, 2022



The writer is a lawyer.

**IT is no secret that oppressed and vulnerable communities in Pakistan are routinely targeted. Religious minorities, women, students, children, transpersons, and people of certain ethnicities periodically find themselves at the mercy of forces out to 'homogenise' society. Intolerance against women and others is growing steadily.**

Unfortunately, most cases of human rights violations go unnoticed. Very few attract the attention of media and rights activists — with the electronic and print media often focusing on certain incidents, whereas others of a similar nature are not highlighted. The crimes against these people never garner public attention or attract the notice of the higher authorities. Those that are reported go on to become the focus of the law enforcers, the judiciary and human rights NGOs. State-mandated commissions are set up to investigate such instances, and as a result, progress on resolving these cases is accelerated.

A closer look reveals a pattern. There seems to be an unspoken, unwritten protocol of selectivity — often in sync with the political views of owners of news channels or newspapers and magazines. In more general terms, the importance of a case can rest on factors such as ethnicity, urban versus rural issues, the

social and political status of the victim or perpetrator. These often determine the media's handling of such situations.

For instance, the harassment of a couple by the accused Usman Mirza, who ran a car business, received huge attention on social media, but the case of Dodo Bheel, a worker in a private company who died after being subjected to intense torture for several days reportedly by the company's guards over alleged theft in Tharparkar district, did not.



*Not all cases of grave human rights violations make it to the media.*

Why did his case not attract the attention of most media outlets and human rights organisations? Is it because he belonged to a low-caste Hindu minority community or because the perpetrators worked in a corporate company and did not belong to any political or high social class? Noor Mukadam's heinous murder was rightly highlighted by the media, resulting in speedy justice. But what about Quratul Ain Baloch, the mother of four children who was allegedly murdered by an abusive spouse? Her case was hardly taken up by the media or human rights activists. Faryal, a 35-year-old mother of three, was stabbed to death allegedly by her husband in their house in Karachi. But there was very little public reaction, media coverage, or concern shown by rights activists' when compared to, say, the Nazim Jokhio case.

Forced conversion is a very serious matter and mostly involves lower-caste, non-Muslim, minor girls. Pooja Kumari, a low-caste Hindu teenage girl, was killed after she apparently resisted her abduction linked to alleged forced conversion for marriage. According to an HRCP report, nearly 1,000 girls belonging to minority Hindu and Christian communities are forcibly married or converted to Islam every year in Pakistan. It is an issue of grave concern, yet there is no sustained campaign by rights NGOs or government authorities to end forcible conversions.

Baloch students have routinely complained of harassment and racial profiling at campuses in Punjab, both by university administrations and other students groups. The challenges these students face never make it to the agenda of activists or to the mainstream media. There has been criminal silence on violence against transpeople. Over the years, scores of such persons have been killed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Ethnic Shia Hazaras and Ahmedis have long been persecuted for their faiths. According to a report by the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR), 509 Hazaras have been killed in various incidents of terrorism in Quetta over the past five years.

The NCHR was created to protect and promote fundamental human rights guaranteed in the 1973 Constitution. The Sindh Commission on the Status of Women maintains an office and staff and conducts periodic meetings, generating glossy reports with the help of consultants and INGO funding. Likewise, the Sindh Human Rights Commission also has an office and staff and is mandated to take up all human rights violations that take place in the province.

Civil society needs to evaluate the performance of these commissions, and monitor the implementation of their mandates and sanctioned funds received from the government and INGOs. The Sindh Commission on the Status of

Women, the NCHR and the Sindh Human Rights Commission should enhance their coordination with each other, avoid the duplication of efforts and proactively and efficiently execute their responsibilities which have been enshrined in their mandate and take up cases of human rights violations without coming under any pressure or compromise.

*The writer is a lawyer.*

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