Stories derived from true life

Violence, Health and Rights

The three important aspects of a woman’s life
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We are thankful to local organizations, members of Shirkat Gah, Sajida Parveen, Afshan Naz, Sadaf Malik, Shagufta Hidayat and Waqar-u-Nisa with whose assistance the acquisition of these stories became possible. Additionally we are also thankful to Shahnaz Iqbal, Khawar Mumtaz and Dr. Saman Yazdani for their special advice.
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Introduction

In almost every society girls and women are subjected to psychological and physical violence. As a result they are deprived of their basic human rights and are unable to lead happy lives. This violence is common in all classes, social strata and cultures and is one of the reasons for women’s poor financial and social status. Violence comprises of the following types but its circle can be even wider:

- Physical, sexual and psychological violence and pressure at the hands of family members. It includes torture, husband’s sexual violence, violence related to demands for dowry and all those traditions that are harmful for women. Apart from the husband, other relatives are also capable of cruelty and oppression on women. The objective for this violence can be to gain illegitimate advantages such as to take away children, money and property.

- General physical, sexual and mental violence/torture involves rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and harassment at workplace and educational institutes. Other than this, labelling “kari” meaning honour killing in the name of custom and culture, “vani” or “sawara” which
is the giving away of women as part of a revenge settlement, the abduction of women and girls and the subsequent forcing of them into prostitution, are all part of this violence. Women can not trust governmental institutions such as police, jails and the individuals related to them for they are not trained at all in gender related issues.

A constant fear and insecurity takes shape in the hearts of women. They find themselves alone and are scared to share their feelings with people. Due to the violence and fear it is not possible for women to move about freely, which is why they are deprived of different facilities and resources. Because of this threat of violence women and society both suffer financial losses. Woman’s health is affected and her social status also remains subpar. Through this weapon women are forced to accept a permanently lower status than men. Very often women are subjected to violence and aggravation in their own homes. Domestic violence is readily
accepted by the society as it is considered a household matter. Violence against women is not normally reported therefore it is difficult to ascertain the correct number of such incidents. Even if these incidents were to be reported, women subjected to violence are not protected sufficiently and the probability of the culprit getting due punishment is very low.

There are two important facets of Pakistani society. One facet is that a woman is venerated in her capacity as mother, daughter, sister and wife and is considered respect-worthy. The other prominent and dark aspect is that there are numerous ways in which women are dishonoured and this circle is very wide. According to various researches, the patriarchal system is responsible for the deprivation of women of their rights and the violence instigated against them especially domestic violence which has become a part of the prevalent customs and culture. In the patriarchal system, man is imposed upon women as the role model to be followed, the basis for which is that man is superior and woman is inferior. The only way for women to attain a higher status in the family is to give birth to a boy which is why she too wishes for a boy. Even if no contempt is expressed at the birth of a girl, a glimpse of sadness can still be seen. Examples of gender-based discrimination against girls during childhood, including giving preference in education, food, clothing and in likes and dislikes to boys over girls, are quite apparent in our society.

Growing up in such negative environment, boys learn from a very young age that women are dependent on men, not only financially but even for going out of the house and in making of any kind of decisions. This is why in most homes they are considered the property of fathers, husbands and brothers. At the time of marriage, usually male relatives arrange the wedlock of the girl and boy, with no regard to their consent and specially asking for the girl’s consent is
considered out of the question. In many families, girls are married off at a young age because parents want to rid themselves of the “burden”. Usually their social and financial circumstances are the factors behind this trend.

Another thing that is commonly seen is the exchange marriages or “watta satta” tradition. The advantages that are enumerated for the marriages between cousins or close relatives are in fact advantages only for the families rather than the bride, as quite often a young girl is married to an older man or a young boy is married to an older woman. As a result of such an ill-matched wedlock although boys can get into another marriage but the girl has no alternative. Early age marriage of girls has a negative impact on their health. In exchange marriages when matters in one family go wrong, it affects the relationship of the other pair because if one husband inflicts torture on his wife, the other finds it his responsibility to do the same to his wife in revenge. In this way, due to this archaic tradition, the woman is deprived of all her basic human rights. A woman victim of social oppression, although by lowering her head in submission to her parents’ will, suppressing her own desires, passing through the stages of hesitation and acceptance, does eventually become someone’s wife, but then she spends the rest of her life being subjected to the torment of deprivation and victimization.

Situation worsens when a woman is constantly subjected to psychological violence. Customs based on superstitious beliefs, cultural traditions and family restrictions are the reasons behind the psychological violence. These repugnant traditions and attitudes have weakened women, emotionally and psychologically and they don’t find the strength in them to raise their voice for their rights.

If looked in totality, 30 percent of Pakistan’s population lives even below the poverty line. Particularly women
belonging to poor communities in comparison to others, do not get equal opportunities and information that makes them more vulnerable to gender discrimination and violence. A woman’s natural and medical immunity is compromised making her prone to illnesses, especially reproductive and sexual health related diseases, and infections become more difficult to overcome. Majority of women in Pakistan are not aware of their rights with regards to sexual and reproductive health and to make matters worse, gender discrimination exists in the whole health system. They are not provided with sufficient health facilities. Likewise, if one glances at the national budget of the country, even in that there is no special allocation for women’s health, which affects various basic indicators of human progress. Following statistics are a proof of this situation.

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National and International Declarations and Procedures for eradication of violence against women

National and international level documents exist in Pakistan stating that the government is responsible for taking different actions with regards to violence against women. Some brief information from Constitution of Pakistan 1973, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Beijing Platform for Action and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is being provided here.

Constitution of Pakistan

According to the Constitution of Pakistan, all the citizens are guaranteed basic rights and among these laws general good behaviour has prime status and equality before law, social, economic and political justice, and freedom of thought, expression, belief, “deen” (religious way of life), worship and gathering are all included.

Article 9 – Freedom of Person:
No one shall be deprived of life or freedom, unless the law allows for it.

Article 25 – Citizen Equality:
1) All citizens are equal before law and are equally deserving of protection of law.
2) There will be no gender discrimination.
3) Anyone mentioned in the article shall not be stopped from a special act on part of the country for the protection of women and children.

Article 35 – Protection of Family etc:
The country shall protect marriage, family, mother and child.
Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women has an international value and the member states of UN are encouraged to accept it. CEDAW has an important status among all international agreements on human rights because it brings the rights of half the population of the world, i.e. women, within the sphere of human rights. This convention was shaped as an international agreement in 1981.

CEDAW requires its member countries to ensure complete growth of women in all political, educational, employment, health, economical, legal, marital and family related fields and to guarantee that in all these fields they will bring about such a change, by virtue of which all sorts of discrimination, customs and cultures and method that allow women to be thought of as lesser beings, will be eliminated.

National Statistics on violence against women from January to June 2008 show that a total of 1705 cases were registered. These include murder, honour killing, attempt to murder, abduction, suicide and attempted suicide, rape, gang rape, state violence, torture in police custody, burning, acid throwing, human trafficking, various forms of torture and physical torture. These reported cases are only the tip of the iceberg.

(Glimpses from Aurat Foundation report on VAW Jan-June 2008)
Beijing Platform for Action

In 1995, UN’s fourth international conference for women was held in Beijing, in which the decisions made in previous conferences were given a better shape by increasing coherence and they were once more authenticated. On this occasion Beijing Platform for Action was approved with regards to progress and peace and this became a guiding document showing the framework to women’s empowerment, all over the world. In Beijing Platform for Action twelve sections have been identified as warranting attention, of which violence against women is the fourth important section. Quintessential goals of which are:

1. Take integrated measures to prevent and eliminate violence against women.
2. Study the causes and consequences of violence against woman and the effectiveness of preventive measures.
3. Eliminate trafficking in women and assist victims of violence due to prostitution and trafficking

(The national report that Pakistan made for Beijing contained a 13th section i.e. “addition of disabled women”. The 20 year programme that Pakistan put forth to follow the Beijing Platform includes this 13th section.)

In Pakistan, women to a great extent have been deprived of the knowledge of their rights and provision of facilities. Likewise their participation in social and other activities is also very limited due to their physical weakness or insecurity, class, creed, urban and rural grading and regional differences. They do not even have the freedom to exercise their rights in their own family or population. The need of the hour is that the government institutions working on these problems
ensure an enabling environment and enact such policies that enable women not only to learn about their rights but also reap their benefits.

It has always been Shirkat Gah’s endeavour to not only highlight the rights and problems related to women but also facilitate solutions through mobilizing people and organizations. For that very reason, this booklet contains such case studies in which the medical, economic and social aspects of violence against women are reflected and an attempt has been made to illustrate the various forms of violence against women, the different levels of society at which it occurs, the perpetrators (within and outside home), the reasons behind the violence, and the impact it has on the health, particularly reproductive health of women.
Stories Derived from True Life
Am I made of impure clay?

Sakina Bibi belonged to a poor household. Beside herself and her husband her family consisted of her mother-in-law, father-in-law, two brother-in-laws of whom one was married and two sister-in-laws. She says “I was married three years ago, when I was 16 years old, to my paternal uncle’s son. My cousin didn’t like me but the marriage took place on the insistence of family elders. Only a few days of the marriage went well and then everyone’s behaviour started to change and the cruelties of my husband and in-laws started.

After two months of our marriage my husband complained to my father-in-law that I don’t have sex with him. On hearing this, his father brought him sleeping pills that he dissolved in water and gave to me. When I lost consciousness my husband abused me sexually. I didn’t have any clothes on when I came to my senses. It was winter and my husband made me bathe with cold tap water. When I narrated this incident to my sister-in-law, instead of chastising my husband, she told me that this was the way of this household and her husband also subjected her to similar things.

My husband was an addict and a compulsive gambler,
he used to beat me up without reason and he didn’t come home for many days at a time. My in-laws falsely alleged that I had illegitimate relations with my husband’s older brother. Later they said that we did this to make your husband come back home. My mother-in-law and sisters-in-law used to say that you are “impure clay”. On numerous occasions they tried to kill me by electrocution. They used to say that if I died, they would say that I committed suicide.

My in-laws were very cruel. They never used to let me out of the house; so much so I was not even allowed to go to my mother or brother’s house. Once I stayed over at my brother’s house. Upon returning my husband beat me up brutally. It was summer and he locked me in a room. There was no fan or bed in the room. I sat on the table for the whole night. I used to be very frightened of him. When he used to beat me no one came to my help. Twice, due to his torture and violence during pregnancy I started to bleed due to which I had two miscarriages. I was again at my in-laws’ home when I got pregnant for the third time. My health deteriorated in the third month of pregnancy. When I consulted the village dispenser, he said that there were injuries in the womb and asked me to consult a doctor. I told this to my husband but he paid no attention. My condition deteriorated to such an extent that even eating and
drinking caused me pain and burning sensations.

After one week, my condition became so bad that I sent my mother a message that I was dying and that if she was my mother she should take me away or else I would not survive. My mother took me home and got me checked by a lady health worker in the village, who said that I had “athra”. Since my father isn’t alive, my mother alone had to do extra work in order to pay for my treatment.

Towards the end of the ninth month when I started to feel the pains, my mother took me to the District headquarter hospital without any delay. My daughter was born after a minor operation. Doctors told us that due to my young age and a small pelvis I had had problems in giving birth. Now my daughter is a month old but no one has come to see her. Sometimes I wonder if I had had a son, would they still have behaved in the same manner.

Fifteen days before the birth of my daughter, my husband had come to our village to meet his relatives; they asked him if he was going to take me back but he had told them that it would be preferable to take a donkey back home rather than take me.

Sakina says that she has faced a lot of cruelties and torture. Her husband and his family did not giver her any rights. If the government gives rights to women are they of any use if she and women like her can’t get them?
Why am I so helpless?

Perveen comes from an under-privileged family. Her husband runs a general store and she has three kids. She has been married for ten years. Talking about her life she says “I was only eight when my mother passed away and from then my bad fortune began. Soon after my mother’s death my father remarried and my step-mother began her cruelties and torment. She used to hit me a lot and she made me do all the chores when girls of my age would be playing with dolls. But I was still very and young and naive then. When I turned fourteen I was engaged to my maternal cousin.

My brother, against the wishes of my father, forcefully married me to my cousin. This was a “watta satta” (marriage in exchange). When I got to my in-law’s I realized that nobody liked me. My brother-in-law’s behaviour was very rude towards me and he used to hurl obscene abuses at me. Let alone others, my own husband didn’t like me. He used to make fun of me by saying that I was short and I was not pretty. In fact he wanted to marry again and found excuses to beat me with slaps, shoes and sticks”.

Reminiscing about the past, Perveen further said that
During my first pregnancy I used to do all the chores of the house and then also go to the barn to look after the animals. Due to excessive work and lack of rest, at the time of labour my condition became really bad. I was alone and in excruciating pain. When I asked my husband to call a *dai* (traditional birth attendant) he left without a word. Then I begged my mother-in-law. She, too, paid no attention and the pains became unbearable. At last the baby girl was born without any help. My daughter was ten days old when they sent me to fetch animal feed. When the feed was chopped too small my husband beat me up, but no one came to my help or stopped my husband. In fact at times, my mother-in-law and sister-in-laws would leave the house when I was being beaten up. Parveen spoke of another incident saying Once I was beaten because a cat had come into the room and drunk some milk. I can not express in words, how much I hate my husband. I am so depressed that I don’t even feel like asking him for anything. But he doesn’t care. If I ever fell ill, he never brought medicine, but when it came to his desires he would grab me by my hair and lay me down, do what he wanted to do and leave. I am bearing
all of this for the sake of my children and I don’t want to leave the house. Now I often remain ill, my body aches and I suffer from high blood pressure.

What should I do? Where should I go? I have no one in this world who would share my sorrows. I pray to Allah that those daughters who don’t have mothers, should die.
What crime have I committed?

Kulsoom is from a middle-class family. She is illiterate. While telling her story she disclosed that this was her second marriage. Her first husband had divorced her and now she was the second wife of her current husband with who she had no children. However she did have six children from her first husband who used to work as a driver in Lahore. She had been twenty years of age at the time of her first marriage and had soon become pregnant but had had a miscarriage in the third month. According to Kulsoom, she was fine at night but bleeding started when she woke up in the morning. She told her mother-in-law who said “good riddance, it was an illegitimate child, my son has been in Lahore and we don’t know with whom you have been disgracing yourself. This child wasn’t ours”. She lost another baby in the fifth month of pregnancy. She wasn’t feeling well and her husband was at home. She was lying down and all of a sudden severe pain started in her abdomen and bleeding ensued. She told her mother-in-law and husband but they said they would call the doctor in the morning. They called a dai (traditional birth attendant) in the morning who, after checking, made her drink tea sweetened
with ‘gur’ (brown suger). With her in this conditions her husband fought with her and left. The bleeding continued and the child came out piece by piece. She bled throughout the month and was in severe pain but no one brought her any medication. During all of this, her husband neither came nor enquired after her. Because of this miscarriage her body became swollen and she got very weak. After two years she got pregnant for the third time, the same dai handled her case and a boy was born. Time kept passing, her husband would come after a year or six month gap but he would never give her any money. Her father-in-law used to beat her kids and treat them really badly. When her third child was born, her husband contracted a second marriage without her consent. At that time she had been married for 13 years. Even before that her husband would often my husband used to say, whenever he fought with me,

“Ek watta pattan tay sau rana kadaan”
Meaning, if I lift a brick, a hundred women would come from underneath it. Qulsoom said that her husband’s attitude towards me was bad since the beginning. He didn’t provide for me nor my children. Once, without my husband’s knowledge, I gave money in a monetary committee and when I got the money from it my father helped me buy a piece of land of which my husband found out. He asked me to transfer the land in his name. When I declined, after a year of buying the land, he threw me out of his house and I came to my parent’s house. They took away my children and left me to yell and cry. Eight years later he divorced me and 3 years after that my parents married me without my consent. today I am again in trouble, neither am I living nor am I dead. I’ve fallen ill by constantly worrying. My rights have never been delivered upon because it’s a man’s duty to provide a woman with bread, cloth, food and to provide woman with every facility but my second husband is also the same. Husband and wife have the right to sit together and one needs the husband’s love but my husband doesn’t even talk to me. There is restriction on going anywhere. If one doesn’t receive the love of her husband then what is the use of such a life. Now that I come to think of it, life was better with the first husband. My first husband still asks me to name the land to the kids and come back. Now am helpless and powerless, neither can I go out of the house nor can I do any labour. That is why I’ve fallen ill. A woman who is empowered in her house can take any decision. She can lead a healthy and happy life but, for me, a good life is like an elusive dream.”
Do I have any rights?

Shazia’s belongs to a poor family. Her father is a labourer. She has three sisters and one brother. Shazia while narrating her story said “I was married when I was twenty one years old within my relatives. From the very first day, my husband’s attitude towards me was not good because he had been forced to marry me. His family had convinced him to agree by promising him that he could marry a second time of his own choice.

After one year of marriage I gave birth to a girl; three years later I had a second daughter and three more years after that I had a third one. My husband didn’t physically beat me but he verbally abused me and fought with me a lot on trivial things such as not ironing his clothes or doing other work for him. The actual reason was that he wanted to marry again but the excuse he gave me was that I was producing only daughters. Then without telling he got married again. He didn’t send me any money, which is why I had to work in the fields to feed my daughters. One day when I came home from the fields my husband had brought a woman with him and told me that she was his second wife. I cried a lot on hearing this but put up a brave face and requested him to at least treat us equally. However his
only reply to that was that he would treat us the way he wanted. His parents had approved of this marriage so obviously they did nothing. Now my husband lives with his second wife in Multan. It has been three years and he has not kept any contact”. Shazia continued her story with a heavy heart, “a year ago my youngest daughter, who was seven at that time fell ill and died. I called my husband and told him that his daughter had died, and that he should at least come and see her face for the last time. But he told me to bury her as he could not come. This attitude of my husband has devastated my health. Constant worrying has made me ill. I get periods two times in a month because of the stress.”

Shazia says that she has never felt empowered and her wishes have never been respected. Had her wishes been respected she would not have ended up like this. She has no authority, either inside her home or outside it. Nobody
cares about her or ever consults her in any matter. She says that when a person is empowered, things happen according to one’s wishes, one is healthy, happy and there are no worries. But she is always worried that she has to work to feed her daughters. Shazia says that the government may have provided women the right to marry by their choice but this right is never given to them.
Was death her only escape?

Kausar belonged to a middle-class family. Her family comprised of her husband, his parents, and his brother and sister. Hameeda, her sister-in-law (Kausar’s brother’s wife), while narrating Kausar’s story, said that she was 17 years old when she was married. After one year of marriage when she got pregnant, she got herself checked by a dai, who told her she had twins. She had a lot of pain from the beginning. When she used to tell her mother-in-law about it she would dismiss it lightly saying ‘this happens’. When she would tell her own mother, she would ask her mother-in-law to get her checked, but the mother in law said that everyone would get to know about the twins and people would get jealous. The pregnancy Kausar’s body began to get swelling. When the called she said that the swelling above the feet was dangerous and that a doctor should be consulted but her mother-in-law said that this happened to everyone and that it used to
happen to her as well. Her diet too was not taken care of. She wasn’t given a decent diet; she only had boiled rice, which was more dangerous for her swelling.

Then one day when her state worsened, she was shown to a doctor in the district hospital. He too said that she had twins and that she was very weak and had a low blood count. He advised a good diet and fruits so that she could gain some strength and he also wrote them a prescription for medicines. He instructed them to have her undergo a complete treatment but her mother-in-law didn’t buy her the medicine and came back home. When her seventh month started the swelling increased quite a bit and she couldn’t even do the chores of the house.

One day her blood pressure dropped considerably. Her mother-in-law took her to the hospital where the doctor again told her that the blood level was very low and she needed blood transfusion or else both the babies and mother would die. To this her mother-in-law said that she didn’t have any money and there was no one to donate blood. The doctor told her numerous times that she should try and call someone who could help but she didn’t comply and brought Kauser back home. Now she even had trouble breathing. Her husband didn’t pay any attention, and did whatever his mother told him. He didn’t have any sympathy for his wife’s misery. When she (Hameeda) went to see her with her husband, her mother-in-law didn’t let me see her. Hiding from the mother-in-law she took a look at the swelling on Kauser’s feet.

After suffering pain for two days, the mother-in-law took her to the doctor who refused to take her case. Then she took her to another doctor, who also declined. He advised them to take her to Hyderabad. When they got to Hyderabad it was four o’clock in the evening. The doctor
checked her and put her on oxygen and starting transfusing blood. Fifteen minutes later, Kausar died. The heartbeat of the babies in the womb was still audible and the doctor said they could operate to deliver the babies, but the mother-in-law refused, saying “who would look after them”, and the babies died inside the womb.

Hameeda says that the biggest reason behind Kausar’s death was that she didn’t get timely treatment. If only her husband had been vigilant, Kausar would have been alive but due to the irresponsible attitude of all the family members, she lost her life.
Was it suicide?

Salma’s family was poor. She lived with her husband, his parents, his two brothers of whom one was married and his three sisters. Salma’s mother said that Salma was married within the family when she was twenty years old. One week after the marriage her husband raised his hand on her just because she didn’t bring a glass of water in time.

At the time of marriage her husband didn’t have any work, and when we talked to them about this, Salma’s mother-in-law said that he would get some work soon and that our daughter won’t die of hunger. However only a few days after her marriage the wife of her brother-in-law started to taunt her that her husband didn’t earn anything but she ate three times a day. Salma worked all day, doing household chores, but she still she had to bear their taunts and beating. Beside her husband, even her brothers-in-law used to hit her.
Salma’s mother said that just a short time after the marriage they started calling her daughter infertile. When her daughter came home to visit she was very sick. She stayed for a week and she took her to a doctor and got her treated. She was pregnant. Her mother-in-law came and took her back. Salma didn’t want to go back.

Salma’s mother said that besides Salma she had four other daughters; if she had brought her home as well it would have been problematic, which is why when her mother-in-law came for her, she sent Salma with her.

One day when she went to see her daughter, she had an injury on her hand and was making bread. I came back after a while but I was very upset. Then after a few days I came to know that my daughter had got burnt and was at the hospital and two days later she passed away. Her neighbours told me that she had poured gasoline on herself and lit herself up. She had said that she was sick and tired of the daily fights and beatings and she wanted to end it once and for all.
Was I not entitled to a better treatment?

Jannat hails from a middle-class family and lived with her husband, his parents, and her husband’s brother and his wife. Jannat says “I was married outside the family, three years ago, at the age of eighteen. After my marriage my whole life changed.

After six months of the marriage my husband beat me for the first time on my mother-in-law’s insistence, when I went to the neighbour’s house without permission. They didn’t even let me go to my parent’s house alone and would take me there themselves. Whenever they beat me I used to think, what have I done?

I did all the chores of the house but still my in-laws were not happy with me. One day I was working in the fields, when I got thirsty and went to the canal for a drink of water. That day my husband beat me up and alleged that I went there to see men.

When I got pregnant for the first time, I had a miscarriage because of excessive work. The placenta stayed in my womb for five days, but they didn’t take me to the
hospital and made me run in the courtyard, saying that the running would help the placenta to come out by itself.

One day when my mother broke her leg, my brother came to fetch me. I told my mother-in-law and brother-in-law and left for Hyderabad. At that time I was eight months pregnant. When after four days I came back with my brother then in the evening my husband beat me and threw me out of the house and told me to go back to my mother. I got to my aunt’s house in tears. She told my mother and on the following day she took me to my mother and told her that my in-laws were beating me.

Then, all of a sudden, my condition worsened and I started to bleed. My family members took me to the hospital. Because of excessive bleeding my condition became serious and my brother had to give me his blood. No one from my in-laws came and a few days later my
husband came to my brother’s shop to give the divorce papers.

Now his family members have got him married again and he has three kids and I don’t know for what crime I was punished.
Was “watta satta” (marriage in exchange) my choice?

Reshma belongs to a poor family; she has a large family, which consists of her mother-in-law, two sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, wife of a brother-in-law, her husband and herself. Reshma told that she was married two years ago, at the age of 18, within the family in a “watta satta” type exchange, her being given in exchange for her brother’s marriage.

My brother didn’t like his wife and he had accepted this marriage because of me, which was why his wife was not happy in her new home. Initially my husband’s attitude towards me was very good but later upon my mother-in-law’s provocation he began to frequently abuse me and hit me even on petty issues. There was nothing I could have done so I just quietly bore it all. Once I stayed over for a night at my parents’ home. The next second day when I came back my husband didn’t talk to me and in the night he not only hit me but sexually abused me as well. At that time I was pregnant but I didn’t know it.

A few days later I started to feel pain and I told my
brother-in-law’s wife. She told my mother-in-law who called the dai. The dai confirmed that I was actually pregnant and she advised them to take care of me because I was very weak. At this my mother-in-law replied that they gave me whatever they had and that I came this way from my parents’ home. That time I felt very sad and I cried a lot but my brother-in-law’s wife consoled me and asked me not to cry and said that God would make things better.

One day my brother and his wife (who was also my husband’s sister) fought over something and my brother’s wife came back to her parents’ home. When she came, my mother-in-law sent me to my parents’ home. I left knowing that it was not my fault. Two months later my brother, on my mother’s persuasion, went to bring back his wife and then my husband took me back too. As a result of all this worry and fear I started to bleed. My mother-in-law said that this was routine and there was nothing to worry about so I remained quiet. When I told my husband he remained silent as well.

One day my brother hit his wife and my husband came back home very angry. He kicked me for not bringing his
meal on time. One of the kicks hit me on my belly. As this point I was eight months pregnant. When my condition worsened they called my mother and she took me to the hospital. My child died and when he was born there was an injury bruise on his head, which devastated me because I would picture playing with him in my thoughts and used to think that by his coming some of my anguish would go away but my fate took away even this happiness from me.
Farzana is twenty years old. She is illiterate and belongs to a middle-class family. Farzana says she was married, out of the family, at the age of fourteen. This marriage was arranged by a woman of her village who had relatives in her in-laws’ village. Farzana narrates, “it had only been a few months after my marriage when my husband’s atrocities began. He used to beat me a lot. In severe cold nights he used to make me stand naked on one leg, pushing me against a cold trunk and then slap me and hit me with sticks. In the nights of “Po Magh” (December-January) he used to make me sit pressed against glass, as the glass was cold. He didn’t talk to me. After one year of marriage when I was not getting pregnant, my in-laws started to say that I was a eunuch. Then my mother-in-law took me to renowned doctors. After one year of treatment I got pregnant but even during pregnancy my husband used to hit me. When my daughter was born, all of my in-laws including my husband, began saying that this wasn’t their child. I pleaded with them to convince them but they didn’t listen to a word of what I said, and had a DNA test done on my daughter.

My husband had an extra-marital affair with another
woman and he didn’t talk to me for months. I saw my husband with that woman on numerous occasions. When he hit me he used to play cassettes on high volume so that no one could hear my voice outside. The reason behind his hitting me this hard was that he wanted me to leave on my own but I stayed on, bearing the brunt of his torture. I didn’t leave the house to protect my father’s honour. I didn’t share my misery with my mother because whenever she found out about anything, she fought with my father. I didn’t tell her much but I told everything, about the ways in which I was being tortured, to the woman who had arranged this marriage. She always used to ignore me by asking me to hang on and not to tell my mother. I used to think that if he is not fulfilling his obligations, then he must be religious, I must not become disobedient. Through deception he had taken my thumb impression on legal papers that said that I had agreed to his second marriage. One day, without my husband’s knowledge, I showed those papers to my neighbours who told me that my husband had taken my thumb impression on consent papers for his second marriage. It was also written on that document that I wilfully wanted divorce from my husband. When I asked my husband about this he beat me up very badly and threw
me out of the house saying that he would leave me but not that other girl (his mistress). After the birth of my baby girl he sent me the divorce papers. The same day he sent me the divorce papers he got married again. We returned the papers. It has been seven years now, he has neither sent me the divorce papers again nor has he come to take me back”.

Farzana said that there are one hundred and one rights for women but all the time she spent at her in-laws’ home she never got any right. Women whose husbands are like hers don’t get their rights. All her life she felt empowered. At her in-laws she did not even have the right to prepare a meal when her parents visited. She used to wonder what crime she had committed for which she was being punished. In these seven years they have not even once asked about her or her daughter. Now her parents were supporting both of them.
Why divorce is a threat to me only?

Reshma was from a middle-class home. She used to teach in a school when she was married into a wealthy family. After 28 days of marriage Reshma’s husband left the country. After he left, her mother-in-law started her cruelties. Six months later her husband came back for a month, and during this time she got pregnant. After her husband left her mother-in-law began to torture her in different ways. She used to hit her and abuse her on trivial things and didn’t give her anything to eat because of which her health steadily declined. When the time of childbirth came close her mother-in-law beat her up and threw her out of the house and sent her to her mother’s home. Because of weakness, there were a lot of complications during childbirth. After the child was born, Reshma’s mother-in-law came and took Reshma with her but still did not change her violent behaviour. Whatever money her husband sent was kept by her mother-in-law who didn’t give her so much as a paisa and when she would ask her mother-in-law for money she would be told that “Why do you need money, you earn yourself and you and your son get your meals ”. When her husband called, only the mother-in-law would
speak to him and Reshma would not be allowed to speak. With a lot of difficulty she got to talk to him once and when she asked him to send her some money for herself and their child, her husband answered that he sent money to his mother, and she should ask her. Reshma told her husband that his mother didn’t give her any money, and also told him about all her cruelties. Her husband took his mother’s side which worried Reshma. Reshma’s earnings were not sufficient to provide for her child and herself. Her parents sent a little amount of money as they were poor themselves and it was very difficult for them to provide for their daughter and grandchild. After some time her husband returned. For a few days he was very happy and took care of his child and wife but his mother started to instigate him against his wife and she provoked him so much that he started becoming physically violent towards her. So much so that he forbade her to go anywhere. He even made her quit her job. He didn’t let her meet her parents and didn’t allow her parents or any of relatives to come home to see her. His attitude towards Reshma became humiliating. Now he didn’t talk to her or maintain any conjugal relationship with her. He tortured her in various ways and treats her like
a slave. He used to say to her that if she went to her parent’s home or anywhere else then from that day she could consider herself free (divorced). She doesn’t want a divorce and nor do her parents. For this fear, she doesn’t step out and keeps suffering all these torments.
The incidence of violence against women ranges between 70% and 90%, and is emerging as a huge public health concern. This high incidence is also the cause of a compromise on women’s sexual and reproductive health rights, a decline in their physical and mental health, and increasing maternal mortality and morbidity. Large scale violence against women is also a hindrance in their ability to access medical facilities. This same hindrance, forced sex (according to Pakistani law, forced marital sex is not a crime), rape and domestic sexual abuse are responsible for an increase in unwanted pregnancies (and possibly abortions as well) and for the increase in the infections spreading from sexual acts and HIV/AIDS. The restrictions imposed on women’s mobility create hurdles in their access to existing health facilities and their rights. In addition, the low status of women, overload of work, rearing of children, retrogressive customs and creeds, also contribute to the hurdles in women’s access to sexual and reproductive health.

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