

A Pakistani Woman Is Dead—and the World Looks Away

Asma Yaqub, a 25-year-old woman in Pakistan, was excited about her job as a hair stylist. But two weeks ago her dreams were shattered when a family friend visited her home and then made an unexpected marriage proposal. Asma refused, partly because she didn't like this man, Rizwan, and partly because she was a Christian and he is a Muslim.

Rizwan felt "dishonored" by Asma's rebuff. He was angry. So he poured acid on her body and set her on fire. She was rushed to the hospital, where she languished for two weeks with burns on 90 percent of her body.

She died this week.

"It's so strange that a woman cannot say 'no' to a marriage proposal," says Aila Gill, coordinator for Pakistan's National Commission for Justice and Peace. Noting that Asma's attack is the fifth episode of its kind in the past few months, Gill says "we are witnessing a worrying increase in violence and incidents of intolerance and extremism in our country."

Pakistan is not the only country where violence against women is on the increase. In India, where Hindu nationalists have found support from Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a woman is raped every 15 minutes.

In January, an 8-year-old Muslim girl was drugged and gang-raped for several days. Then her assailants bludgeoned her to death with a stone. The case provoked national outrage partly because lawyers and activist Hindus actually defended the girl's attackers—and Prime Minister Modi waited several days to denounce the crime.

"So much rape and sexual abuse still doesn't get reported

because going to the police is still a nightmare,” says Deepa Narayan, a social scientist and author in India. “If you don’t have political clout or your story doesn’t become a national or international story, forget justice.”

A 13-year-old Indian girl was gang-raped recently by four Hindu men in Haryana state. The girl was kidnapped and repeatedly raped, and then her head was smashed on a wall. Four more rapes and murders of young girls were reported in Indian cities last week.

I looked into the face of similar pain when I was traveling in Central Asia a few weeks ago. I talked with many women in Kyrgyzstan who have endured the horrendous practice of “bride stealing”—which is a cultural norm in many parts of Central Asia. Tradition says a man has the right to kidnap a woman with help from his friends. He then rapes her and forces her to marry him.

In many cases the woman’s parents agree to the arrangement because her virginity has been taken from her, and they feel she has now been “claimed” by a man.

Even though bride stealing is officially illegal, it happens hundreds of times a month in Kyrgyzstan. Police don’t enforce the law because they were married the same way.

I can’t tell you the intensity of the pain that I felt while listening to women tell me how they, or their sisters, were forced into loveless, abusive marriages that began with rape and beatings. It has been more than a month since I was there, and I am still dealing with residual effects of counseling women who were traumatized like this.

What is the problem here? In many parts of the world women are considered a lower class of human beings—or even another species. Men demand respect and submission, so rape, domestic violence or even the murder of a woman is considered trivial.

It is something to be ignored.

This was the attitude of the Pharisees who dragged a woman into the temple court and accused her of engaging in “the very act” of adultery (see John 8:4). They claimed to have proof of the woman’s sin, but they did not produce any evidence. The man she was supposedly with was a no-show.

Men in the days of Jesus viewed women as filthy sinners who were guilty until proven innocent. But Jesus stepped into the court that day and argued the woman’s case skillfully. No religious leader had ever stood up for a woman like this before. Jesus defended her and sent her accusers away.

That’s who Jesus is. When He shows up, justice is served.

Today Jesus has commissioned His followers to speak out on behalf of the voiceless and the abused. It is the church’s job to cry for justice. We can’t wait for the governments of this world or the United Nations to do the job that Christ gave us. We can’t depend on our sensational media—which would rather focus on what gown a movie star wore to an awards ceremony than on the fact that millions of poor girls in developing countries aren’t even allowed to attend school.

The church can either be the salt of the earth—as aggressive change agents—or we can remain passive and irrelevant while the world cries out for someone who cares.