

Defusing violence and vulnerability in Pakistan

Researchers studying how gender roles contribute to different types of violence in Pakistani cities aim to identify solutions and share them widely.

Pakistan has a vigorous civil society, with the strength and courage of its citizens exemplified by individuals such as the young Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai. But since its tumultuous birth in 1947, Pakistan has endured successive waves of violence. In 2013, Karachi's deadliest year on record, violence claimed 2,700 lives and up to 40% of businesses fled the city to escape extortion rackets. A clear diagnosis of the roots of this violence is essential to achieving stability.

Beyond the headline-grabbing attacks, Pakistan's people suffer violence in many forms. Poverty is widespread, with more than half the population living on less than \$2 a day. Communal conflicts have been fuelled by shifts in the country's ethnic and religious balance in the last half-century. Women suffer discrimination under rigid gender roles that both sexes struggle to live up to in conditions of poverty.

The country's population is also young, with more than two-thirds under the age of 30. While much attention has focused on young men as the agents and victims of violence in urban Pakistan, less is known about the experiences of young women. To address this gap, a research team led by the Karachi-based Institute of Business Administration is looking at how gender roles contribute to different types of violence in Pakistani cities. They are assessing whether solutions may lie in highlighting how these roles can entrap men and women, and improving access to livelihood opportunities, education and services such as water and sanitation.

Focusing on youth in working-class areas of Karachi and the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, the team first mapped the main types of violence occurring in each neighbourhood and tracked coverage in the media. They followed up by documenting the perceptions and daily realities associated with the violence, and how young men and women experience it. A central question is how frustrated gender expectations may fuel the violence.

In Rawalpindi and Islamabad, researchers found that both men and women associate masculinity with providing for the family, upholding morals and traditions, and making decisions. Combined with a belief that violence is a justifiable means of maintaining authority, these expectations can be a trigger for men who suffer financially or feel undermined.

Understanding these preconceptions is a first step to identifying solutions. Research suggests, for example, that women's economic status is a significant predictor of abuse. Being able to work and study outside the home can change women's acceptance of domestic violence as "normal" and help them build protective social networks.

Jointly funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre and the UK's Department for International Development, the researchers aim to deepen understanding of how social connections and urban design can address community violence, and to share their findings widely.

Muzaffar Bukhari/Flicker



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Bullet shell found during a community cleanup in Islamabad.

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