Vulnerability and poor services feed violence in Pakistan

Changing gender roles and poor access to public services increase vulnerability and fuel violence in Pakistan's cities. This affects men, women, and transgender people. Improving the quality of these services and increasing access to them could mitigate violence.

The issue: High rates of violence in underserved urban communities

Pakistan's cities are growing at more than 3% annually, the highest rate of urbanization in South Asia. In some cities, such as Karachi, as many as 60% of the population lives in unplanned settlements.

This rapid growth poses formidable challenges, including providing infrastructure services such as water and sanitation, ensuring secure tenure to land and housing, creating jobs, and reducing poverty.

The failure to meet these challenges fuels violence. Ethnic and religious minorities, women, and transgender people are the most frequent victims. They are also the most vulnerable: many, in fact, don't qualify for or can't afford national identity cards, needed to access education, health, and other services — and to get a job.

Together, these factors shape how people interact with each other. How vulnerability and gender relations contribute to violence and are affected by it is little understood, however.

Findings: Vulnerability + lack of services = gender violence

Researchers from the Karachi-based Institute of Business Administration and King's College London found that poor access to services increases people's vulnerability and shapes how they relate to one another.

Recommendations

While traditional perceptions of what it means to be a man or woman persist in Pakistan, they are challenged by poverty, unemployment, and inadequate services, among other factors. Remedies to violence need to reflect each neighbourhood's realities, but **common measures include:**

- Undertake social vulnerability assessments to identify the most vulnerable.

- Improve public services and infrastructure — water supply, solid waste management, utilities, transport, and other services — targeting the most vulnerable.

- Provide greater educational opportunities and job training for women and transgender people, as well as counselling, to reduce their vulnerability.

- Facilitate acquisition of national identity cards that provide legitimacy as citizens.

- Create shelters for victims of domestic violence.

In the longer term:

- Promote more sensitive and comprehensive reporting of gender-based violence in the media.

- Reflect changing gender roles and expectations in gendered empowerment program.

- Promote public education on changing gender roles and expectations.

In 12 working-class neighbourhoods of Karachi and the twin cities of Rawalpindi-Islamabad, researchers found that both men and women share a definition of masculinity: sole provider for the family, upholder of morals and traditions, decision-maker. The struggle to meet these expectations, combined with a belief that violence is justified to maintain authority, can be a trigger for men who suffer financially or feel undermined.

Equally, women also struggle under oppressive gender roles that may constrain their freedom and agency, but are hard to live up to in conditions of poverty.

Poor access to infrastructure and services contributes both to financial strain and disruption of gender roles. For example, gaps in access to water is part of daily life in both cities. Because of the inadequate supply, residents resort to buying water from private vendors – a male responsibility. But household water provision and management is a core aspect of female identity. While the exorbitant cost is a source of anxiety, the disruption of gender roles and responsibilities increases tensions that can lead to violence.

Similarly, the lack of adequate sanitation and solid waste management reduces quality of life and endangers health. This is accentuated in environmentally high-risk areas where economic and social vulnerabilities make the impacts of floods and other hazards potentially disastrous. Violence also sometimes arises over solid waste management or in accessing relief and providing for one's family after floods.

Many communities are also threatened by violence at the hands of strangers. In minority religious or ethnic settlements, for example, no one is spared by gangs, which are backed by political parties who violently extort the residents they purport to protect. This often intersects with the domestic sphere to create gendered violence in both the private and public spaces.

Research participants in Karachi and Rawalpindi-Islamabad also report high rates of psychological violence. For women, this arises mainly from abusive family relationships and limited mobility; for men, causes include financial expectations and the risk of violence at the hands of the state or police. Whatever the cause, it often leads to domestic violence.

The pattern of violence in Pakistan's cities may be changing, however, as the age at marriage increases and women pursue education or employment. Research suggests that improving women's economic status reduces domestic violence. Working and studying outside the home can also change women's acceptance of violence and help them build protective social networks. Technology, such as widely accessible mobile phones, also reduces vulnerability and allows women more freedom.

The research

Following a literature and media review and analysis, researchers from the Karachi-based Institute of Business Administration and King's College London surveyed more than 2400 people in 12 working-class neighbourhoods of Karachi and the twin cities of Rawalpindi-Islamabad. Data was also collected through interviews, focus group discussion, participatory photography, and participant observation. This enabled researchers to triangulate the findings from one method with the others and address different types of data requirements.

Research results are being widely shared with policymakers, international agencies, and research organizations.

Resources:

Anwar, N., et al. 2016. Gender and Violence in Urban Pakistan, Final Report 2016. Institute of Business Administration, Karachi, International Development Research Centre, King's College, London. researchgate.net/publication/301636359_Gender_and_Violence_in_Urban_Pakistan_Final_Report_April_26_2016

IDRC. Gender, vulnerability, and violence in urban Pakistan. Ottawa. www.idrc.ca/en/article/gender-vulnerability-and-violence-urban-pakistan

Safe and Inclusive Cities is a global research effort jointly funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Launched in 2012, it supports 15 multidisciplinary teams working in 40 cities across sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America to build evidence on the connections between urban violence, poverty, and inequalities.

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