

Who will speak out for the forgotten women of conflict?

Deeply traumatised women socialised to 'know their place' often have zero sense of their rights or options



BARIA ALAMUDDIN

International Women's Day rightly celebrates the impressive achievements of courageous women. Yet the world has had less to say about our most vulnerable sisters, as historically elevated levels of displacement due to conflict have left millions of women in hellish conditions in sprawling refugee camps.

A common denominator in these camps — from Greece to Lebanon and Yemen — are epidemic levels of rape and sexual violence, exacerbated by the stigma and ostracisation facing the innocent victims of these crimes. Systematic rape in South Sudan or against Rohingya women seeks to humiliate and dehumanise entire populations based on tribal or religious affiliation. A shocking 2011 statistic estimated that 48 women were raped every hour in the Democratic Republic of Congo, with sexual attacks becoming gruesomely routine in many conflict zones.

Thousands of Iraqis languish in miserable camps long after Daesh's supposed defeat. Wives have seen husbands and sons indefinitely detained, leaving them prone to sexual predation by rampaging paramilitaries.

We can't comprehend the abuse that thousands of Yazidi women endured at the hands of Daesh: Loved ones slaughtered, forced into sexual slavery, daily torture and violation, fearing that each day would be their last.

I was overjoyed at Nadia Murad becoming joint winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. According to

some traditionalist attitudes, a victim of such abuse is no longer an "honourable" part of society. Yet, instead of withdrawing into self-pity, Nadia and others defiantly told their stories, helping make it possible for women to be non-judgmentally embraced back into their communities.

These brave girls must feel no shame. They are heroic survivors and witnesses to monstrous acts by sick individuals who themselves bring shame upon mankind.

Around 1,500 foreign women and children remain in Iraqi custody accused of Daesh links: Are they victims or terrorists? Should we forgive them after they express horror at Daesh's crimes? Should home countries support them in overcoming their traumas? Children aren't accountable for the sins of their parents but, according to Human Rights Watch, that hasn't prevented the Iraqi authorities torturing and detaining hundreds of minors on vague and unproven charges.

Displaced Syrian women have been hugely vulnerable to exploitation. Criminal networks — including elements from Hezbollah — have been involved in prostitution and people-smuggling networks. Women have been compelled or tricked with promises of work, finding themselves shackled into the worst forms of slavery. Starving families resort to selling underage daughters into marriages with wealthy men who they never met.

Deeply traumatised women socialised to "know their place" often have zero sense of their rights or options. We thus must educate all our girls to know their rights; to know how to assert themselves in the face of male aggression and harassment; and to know they are capable of



Ethiopian refugee women wait to receive non-food items distributed by the Kenyan Red Cross.

achieving the highest goals they can imagine for themselves.

In the pressure-cooker environment of the refugee camps, levels of domestic violence are appallingly high — 51 per cent of married Gazan women report domestic violence, while 76pc report psychological abuse. For 70 years, the daily realities of Palestinian women have been arrests, harassment and police brutality. Fearless women like Ahed Tamimi engage in acts of defiance against the horrors of occupation, knowing the brutal and arbitrary responses that Israeli police will mete out.

Within some populations, the woefully misnamed phenomenon of "honour killing" is far more prevalent than official reports indicate. Studies in Russia's Caucasus region demonstrate how the authorities collaborate

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to thwart such cases on the rare occasions when families take action. Young girls who buck tradition and shun arranged marriages to pursue their education are frequently sought out for trumped-up accusations,

with participation in such brutal travesties sometimes even seen as a route to social advancement. There have been cases of gang-rape where the attackers later approached the woman's family demanding that she be killed to atone for the dishonour she brought upon the perpetrators.

It is a joy to read the inspiring stories of successful women: Female government ministers, leading businesswomen, women who have conquered all in our male-dominated world. However, there must not be silence for the forgotten women whose suffering shames us all. We are shamed by the daily reality of rape and abuse against victims of war, but we are doubly shamed by our inability to honestly speak out. In several countries, progress has been made in outlawing female gen-

ital mutilation, yet the societal taboos against discussing the abuse by parents against their own daughters, along with the lack of enlightened education and debate, make it difficult to eliminate this barbaric practice altogether.

The UN, the US, Europe and the world have had their opportunities to act on behalf of the female victims of war. Eight years after the beginning of the Syria uprising, it is safe to say that they have failed. In my experience, inward-looking Western governments are disgracefully set to become less engaged on these challenges.

I, and women like me, live in a blessed cocoon: Blessed education, loving parents and thousand opportunities to improve our status. Yet, how can we celebrate breakthroughs for women's rights knowing that tonight millions of terrorised women will cry themselves to sleep, traumatised by memories of vicious abuse, and from fear that the noises outside the flimsy shelters emanate from men with predatory intentions?

The #MeToo movement proves how decisive women voices can be when we take action against sexual harassment. It is well past time for us fortunate women to act together on behalf of those women — from Libya to Palestine to Myanmar — whose daily reality is violence and abuse. Let us not brag about women's empowerment until we have done everything in our power to empower our most vulnerable sisters.

(Baria Alamuddin is an award-winning journalist and broadcaster in the Middle East and the UK. She is editor of the Media Services Syndicate and has interviewed numerous heads of state)

No Alice in Wonderland!

ANAND NAIR

Exams, salaries, job stability, rising prices, increasing demands! The swords are out. Every day seems to be a battle and the war is never ending. One of the best decisions that I took in recent times is to stop watching NEWS. I was bombed with negative surgical strikes daily and the panel discussion on it. My mind was not allowed to think freely and independently. I became a victim of planted new syndrome. This is not me, I believe. Stopping news was a relief. It helped me think free.

Looking around, I can see only expectations growing. The world market is down and so are the markets in local areas. As a re-

sult, there are serious issues all over. Increasing prices and overheads have started taking a toll and expenditure of every family is in check. The lifestyle of many and lifestyle decisions of many have baffled me. Recently a friend came and shared some startling information about the financial mess another friend has landed into. He has used all his credit cards (three of them I believe), have acquired maximum loans from the banks, took private loans at interest, borrowed from lot of known sources and now see an uncertain future as he does not have any idea how to repay it. The bank collection department keeps on calling him after his failure to pay. I was shocked. Even if his

salary increases four times, he will not be in a position to repay back immediately. A disturbing time awaits him very soon. How can he be supported, this is a big question mark.

Another friend mentioned how he has been a victim of excessive charity. He has helped a few with money out of his meagre salary in times of need. The emotional pressure was so much that he loaned out a portion of his salary. Today when he is in dire need, no one has the ability to return it. He is scared that he too will get into the vicious circle of borrowing. It is a commercial market and to sell, the market hooks us to various offers. If my phone is working fine, why do I need a latest hand-

set on credit that will impact my monthly budget? For how many years will someone earn to just pay EMI's, bank loans, luxury and commodity loans? Where can the thin line be drawn? Who will draw it?

Rags to riches story happens only for Alice in Wonderland. For common people like us, Alice lives on the land full of ground realities not in wonderland. When Mulla Naseeruddin (folklore character believed to have existed in 1208, Turkey) sold one donkey, he immediately asked his wife to spend the entire money. His wife who was very calculative asked him, "If we spend the entire money, what will be left for the future?" Mulla Naseeruddin replied, "You

are always in doubt. If I could sell one donkey, I will surely sell the remaining ones too. With that we will have lot of money and we can spend a lot. Money will start flowing. You take my word; it will. So just spend." He earned, she spent till no more donkeys were left. The future was bleak. With no money, Mulla Naseeruddin realised that he lost many friends too. He broke down. His wife hugged him and said, "Every donkey you sold, I spent only half of the money. Rest half I kept it in the earthen pot. We have money for our use. Let us use it wisely now at least." Though it is just a story, we can draw lessons from it.

The rich is not rich because they spend. The rich is rich because

they save and spend. They know how to save; in today's world-the know how to invest. Remember there is no free lunch (even at home). We need to earn it. Whatever we earn, we have lot of avenues to spend. But let us be wise and choose our spending.

What if Franklin Jerome (don't worry who is he!) cannot go for Paris trip! Let him create his happiness as same as Paris even if he visits his hometown.

It is not wise to survive on credit and create all stress around.

Be wise to live within our means.

No Alice in wonderland. On! Alice on Land.

(Anand Nair is a vice-principal at the Indian School Bahrain)