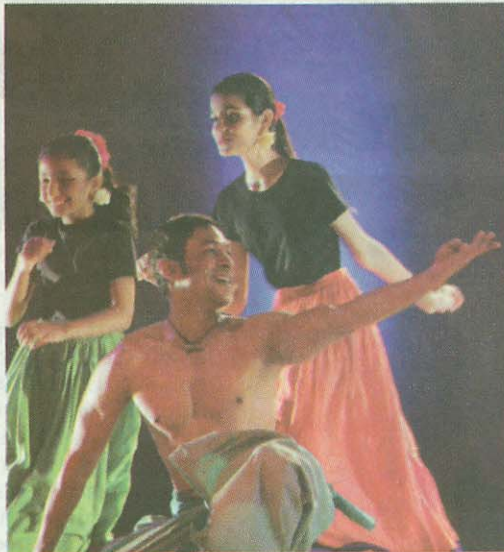


Pakistan joins One Billion Rising to fight abuse



ABUSED: Hundreds of people gather on Valentine's Day to be a part of One Billion Rising. PHOTOS: ATHAR KHAN/EXPRESS



Aurat Foundation organised an event for violence against women

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While all of Karachi was bathed in red on Valentine's Day, more than 1,000 people had collected in an open air theatre at the Arts Council to protest against the blood and tears of women that have been flowing for years all around the world. The event itself took place in connection with similar events taking place simultaneously around the world for the campaign One Billion Rising (OBR), the initiative of playwright and activist Eve Ensler, known for her celebrated play *The Vagina Monologues*. OBR has been launched by Aurat Foundation in Karachi, which organised a seminar and theatre performance by renowned artist and activist Sheema Kirmani of *Tehrik-e-Niswan*.

The name of the campaign is based on the statistic that every third woman is beaten; and with a total of seven billion people in the world, this translates into a grave reality of one billion abused women.

The seminar began with short speeches made by

Pakistani women working for the rights of women and a performance by Kirmani and her protégé. It seemed like the perfect way for women to express their outrage against abuse, demand change, rise against the injustices women suffer all over the world and play a role in ending violence against women.

However, the lack of preparedness demonstrated by the organisers at the seminar made it almost painful to watch. Even though the esteemed panel of female judges, writers and activists had strong points to make about OBR, the way they were just called on the spot by organisers to talk about the concept seemed unprofessional. But the beautifully orchestrated performance *Aao Raqs Karo* (Come and Dance), based on the poetry of famous thinker and poetess Fahimda Riaz sung by Gulshan Ara Syed and Tina Sani, started right on time and delivered a strong message — it more than made up for the seminars' misgivings.

The event wasn't just held for the elite and privileged women of Karachi. It was free and open for all

and the diverse audience consisted mostly of working women, factory workers and their children who need this information and knowledge.

Kirmani took the audience on a visual journey back to the Stone Age, when a woman was integral and played a key role in most activities. From there on, the performance settled on the Neolithic Age when farming became popular. Through dance, she showed the ways women helped mankind with progression and survival. But as humans advanced and time passed, some men became arrogant and made women their victims.

The sequences in which men were shown physically abusing women were so well-acted by the male performers that they almost became hard to watch. All the female performers, especially the younger ones, had a grace which was uniquely their own.

Like all writers, poets and creative geniuses, Kirmani through her dream-like performance and art demonstrated her interpretation of the reasons behind the abuse of women. It seemed that to Kirmani, abuse came down to imprisoning a woman under a chaddar. This was evident when three women were shown writhing under a black cloth.

The question then to be asked is, are women who are not under a chaddar not being abused? Are Western women who were not buried under dark layers safe from rape or molestation?

But like all visionaries, whether or not one agrees, Kirmani has delivered her message, in a colourful and meaningful escapade.