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Equality illusion

For women's rights, still a long way to go

WAF marks 30th anniversary; protest held against child's rape in Lahore

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On Monday, as members of the Women's Action Forum (WAF) assembled at the Nomad Art Gallery to honour the movement WAF pioneered three decades ago, less than a mile away, civil society representatives protested the Lahore rape incident, indicating that the struggle to end violence against women in the country is far from over.

It was over three decades ago that a small group of women came together to speak out, not only for their own rights, but those of all women in the country.

On Friday in Lahore, where WAF held its first demonstration against Zia's oppressive anti-women laws in 1981, a five-year-old girl was raped and dumped outside a hospital.

The rape incident highlights the need for renewed struggle for protection of women and girls in the country. "Social media is very proactive in picking up just cases, but there is need for greater mobilisation, where people should come out in greater numbers to fight for their rights," said Nageen Hyat, one of the founding members of WAF Islamabad and Rawalpindi Chapter.

At the protest in Super Market, activist Samar Minallah said the culture of silence, especially around issues of rape, needs to be challenged. "We have to live in a society that protects our children for which we need to change people's mindset" she said.

The protest, an initiative of Insaani Haqook Tehad, managed to attract around a 100



OUTRAGED: Activists protesting in Sector F-6 against the rape of a five-year-old girl in Lahore. PHOTO: MYRA IQBAL/ EXPRESS

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Poet and activist
Kishwer Naheed



people including members of the civil society, human rights activists and students.

Starting at the greenbelt and trying to grasp attention of passersby, the group, holding "Rape is Rape" placards, was chanting slogans against the act and actively approached passing commuters to join

the protest.

"Five minutes of people's time is all I am asking for," said human rights activist Tahira Abdullah. She added that lack of education was the root cause of such issues and that the particular case was that of paedophilia. "People in Pakistan will take years to understand the phenom-

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WAF founding member and NCSW Chairperson
Khawar Mumtaz



enon," she said, suggesting criminals of such acts should be imprisoned till death.

Human rights activist Farzana Bari told *The Express Tribune* that rape is a phenomenon common in Pakistan however some incidents challenge the threshold of a society's tolerance. "Such cases

trigger civil society to stand up and as more cases like these are reported, new faces join us in our protests," she said, adding that the cases reported by civil society and the media should be followed-up till the culprits are punished.

Back at the gallery, speakers narrated historical accounts

from WAF's women rights' movement.

Khawar Mumtaz, a founding member of the WAF Lahore Chapter and chairperson of the National Commission on Status of Women, recalled the oppressive atmosphere wherein women were attacked on the pretext of "not wearing the dupatta properly" or were ordered to produce their nikahnama (marriage certificate) if they were seen outdoor with a man, even if it was a brother. She said the forum managed to hold conventions through strong coordination within the members.

"In retrospect, I don't think they realised what they were up against, but they persisted," she added.

It was not just about women's issues. Every issue is a women's issue, said, Nasreen Azhar, a founding member of WAF Karachi.

Paiman Alumni Trust Vice President Mosarrat Qadeem spoke about the militancy in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, especially how it was affecting women and children. Speaking about the attacks on girls' schools, Qadeem said, "The agony cannot be expressed in words. One has to see, feel and realise what they went through."

Kishwer Naheed, a noted poet and activist, spoke about the lack of state support then and now. She said that all governments are the same — they are unwilling to tolerate voices that want to change the status quo.

To rekindle the spirit of struggle, Naheed read out two of her poems — "Tum swami ram banay mere" and "Woh jo bachiyon se bhi dar gaye."