NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Men, women, violence, patterns

Phyllis Zagano | Jan. 2, 2013 Just Catholic

Please answer in 750 words or fewer: What is the deal with men's violence against women?

I do not get it. Do you? It seems there is an epidemic of horrendous acts against women around the world.

This past fall in Pakistan, a man shot 14-year-old Malala Yousafzai in the head. She had blogged for the BBC about life under the Taliban. The world's media eye monitored her medical treatment in England. She's won awards. They're naming a girls' school after her. She is still recovering.

That was bad. This is worse. In India in mid-December, six men raped and sodomized a 23-year-old female physiotherapy student. On a bus. With a metal rod.

They flew her to Singapore and kept her alive for two weeks until she died.

In Pakistan and elsewhere, the cry is "we are all Malala," and most of India seems to be protesting the student's death. There is little evidence the protests will change anything at all. Can they?

The New York Times reports a third of New Delhi's female population was sexually harassed in the year prior to a recent survey. One percent complained to the police. Why? Ask any woman. There is danger in reporting trouble. Just last week, two men raped an 18-year-old woman in India's Punjab State. She complained. Then policemen humiliated her, making her describe the attack over and over and over again. She committed suicide.

We can blame violent video games and movies. We can blame poverty and boredom. In some countries, the problem seems to be too many men and not enough women. In India, where girls are often aborted (or, some say, killed at birth), there are 15 million unattached males between the ages of 15 and 35. That number may double by 2020. What will the future bring?

It goes beyond India. China's one-child policy also translates to a superabundance of males. Nearly 10 years ago, Texas A&M political science professor Valerie M. Hudson and her British colleague, Andrea M. den Boer, wrote about Asia's gender imbalance in a book called *Bare Branches* (the Chinese term for surplus young adult males). The professors say the lopsided statistics in Asia -- it is home to 40 percent of the world's population -- have deep security implications.

Hudson and den Boer bluntly state that an overabundance of men portends both domestic and international violence. What's a country to do with all those men? Public works projects and the military spring immediately to the governmental mind, which they say concurrently plans to deepen its authoritarian political system.

And woe to anyone who recommends rebalancing an authoritarian system. The problem reaches far beyond Asia. Even in the West there are bastions of maleness -- both upper and lower class --that guffaw at the thought of a woman in power, a woman making decisions. There are still pockets of "she was asking for it" -- witness the Italian priest (who was thankfully reprimanded) who complained not long ago about the way women were

dressing and "upsetting" men.

Will it ever end?

I believe Christianity is the antidote to any leanings toward meanness or violence. But more than half the world's Christians are in a church that does not appear to treat women as equals. The media encourage that view, and so lots of static blocks transmission of the real message.

True or not, world media portray Catholic women as downtrodden and unfree. Control seems the name of the game. (*NCR* reported recently [1] that the nearly retired Cardinal William Levada, then head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, read all eight pages of his Leadership Conference of Women Religious investigation to the four U.S. sisters assembled before him last April. More likely his young San Francisco priest secretary voiced the damning document, nearly simultaneously published on the Vatican's website. The doctrinal assessment report includes errors. What is their recourse?)

One hopes the U.S. bishops will deal honorably with LCWR. One hopes that the men of Pakistan and India and China will look more favorably on women and girls. One hopes that the many terrible wrongs in overwhelmingly male systems -- whether wars or rapes or homicides or just plain disrespect -- will shrivel in the light of the world's religious wisdom.

There is a long continuum from humiliation to rape. One may not lead to the other, but they are connected. No matter whether with manicured managers or filthy hooligans, the problem remains. There are too many "bare branches" in our world. There is too little respect for women.

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