

SPECIAL ARTICLE:

INTEGRATING FORENSIC MENTAL HEALTH IN LEGAL PROCESSES

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On December 15, 2023, an important and collaborative event took place at Sheikh Zayed Medical College in Rahim Yar Khan. This event was a joint effort by Justice Project Pakistan (JPP), the Pakistan Psychiatric Society (Punjab Chapter), and the departments of Psychiatry and Forensic Medicine at Sheikh Zayed Medical College. The focus of this event was on the critical interplay between mental health and criminal justice in Pakistan, an issue of increasing significance in today's world.

Justice Project Pakistan (JPP), established in December 2009 in Lahore, is a non-profit organization that specializes in legal advocacy. The organization dedicates itself to supporting the most vulnerable groups within the Pakistani prison system. This includes those facing the death penalty, individuals with mental health issues, juvenile prisoners, and victims of police torture. JPP plays an essential role in highlighting and addressing pressing issues within the Pakistani justice system.

A major point of discussion at the event was the situation of the death penalty and capital punishment in Pakistan. As of October 2023, more than 6,039 individuals were on death row in Pakistan, many exceeding the standard 14-year sentence. The discussions brought to light the challenges faced by juvenile prisoners and those with mental health issues, who are disproportionately affected by these severe sentences. The event also showcased case studies illustrating the struggles of individuals who were wrongfully accused or suffering from mental health issues, emphasizing the need for a more compassionate and equitable legal system.

The highlight of the event was the screening of three documentaries. "Unfathomable Wasoon Baar" told the story of Muhammad Afzal, convicted of murdering his family, focusing on his mental health struggles and the societal factors that influenced his criminal behavior. "Kaneezan Bibi" shared the plight of a woman unjustly accused and sentenced to death, shedding light on her mental health deterioration during her 30-year imprisonment. "Juvenile" depicted the life of Muhammad Iqbal, a juvenile offender sentenced to death, critically examining the justice system's approach to juvenile offenders.

An interactive Q&A session followed, involving faculty members, medical professionals, students, lawyers, and other societal members. The discussions explored the intricacies of the death penalty and capital punishment, particularly their intersection with religious beliefs in Pakistan. Representatives from JPP, Stephanie Blakeman and Zil-e-Huma, provided comprehensive insights into these complex issues. They also acknowledged the efforts of the Psychiatry Department at Sheikh Zayed Medical College/Hospital for initiating the Forensic

Mental Health Certification Course in collaboration with Queen's University Canada, Islamia University Bahawalpur, Pakistan Psychiatric Society, Punjab Institute of Mental Health Lahore, and Justice Project Pakistan (JPP).

The event concluded with an acknowledgment of JPP's significant contributions towards advocating for justice reform. Participants received a JPP toolkit to encourage further engagement and feedback. Principal Prof Dr. Muhammad Saleem Laghari of Sheikh Zayed Medical College/Hospital presented a souvenir to Justice Project Pakistan in recognition of their efforts.

Overall, the event at Sheikh Zayed Medical College on December 15, 2023, played a pivotal role in highlighting the urgent need for reform in Pakistan's criminal justice system, particularly regarding the death penalty and the treatment of vulnerable prisoners. The documentaries and discussions were instrumental in raising awareness about the complexities of mental health within the criminal justice system. The involvement of diverse stakeholders from various disciplines underlined the necessity of a collaborative approach to address these systemic challenges.

However, a critique of the event could focus on certain aspects. While the event successfully brought to light the intersection of mental health and criminal justice, it perhaps could have benefited from a more diverse range of perspectives, especially from those directly affected by the criminal justice system. Inclusion of testimonies or experiences from current or former prisoners, their families, or representatives from marginalized communities would have added a deeper, more personal dimension to the discussions.

Additionally, while the event provided a platform for dialogue, the steps towards tangible change or action plans were not clearly outlined. Future events could focus more on developing concrete strategies or initiatives that participants and stakeholders could take forward. This would help in translating the awareness and insights gained into actual policy changes or grassroots movements.

Lastly, while the event commendably included an interdisciplinary panel, the engagement of higher-level policymakers or government officials could have amplified its impact. Their involvement might have offered a direct channel to influence policy changes, making the discussions more actionable.

In summary, while the event served as a crucial platform for dialogue and understanding of critical issues in Pakistan's criminal justice system, enhancing the diversity of perspectives, focusing on actionable outcomes, and involving policymakers more directly could further strengthen the impact of such important gatherings in the future.