

151/99

AI INDEX: ASA 33/20/99

EMBARGOED FOR 0001 GMT 22 SEPTEMBER 1999

Pakistan: Women killed in the name of honour

“The right to life of women in Pakistan is conditional on their obeying social norms and traditions.”

Hina Jilani, Pakistani lawyer and human rights activist

Several hundred women are killed in the name of honour in Pakistan every year, but their murderers are rarely brought to justice, Amnesty International said today.

In its first investigative report into honour crimes committed against women, Amnesty International begins to unravel the web of repressive social norms and traditions in which millions of Pakistani women remain caught, often with the state authorities' outright support.

“Violence against women is a worldwide problem which manifests itself differently according to societies and cultures,” Amnesty International said.

“In Pakistan, honour crimes are justified in the name of tradition -- but the traditions themselves have become distorted and corrupted to allow for widespread abuse.”

“Women and girls are dying at the hands of their husbands, their fathers and brothers, while the authorities pay lip service to their obligations to protect them.”

“The Pakistani authorities ignore honour crimes at the expense of women's most fundamental human rights -- the rights to life and freedom from torture and ill-treatment.”

The threat of violence permeates every aspect of Pakistani women's lives. The flimsiest of suspicions can lead to murder -- a rumour spread in a village, an accusation by a jealous husband, or in one extreme case, a man's dream of his wife's adultery.

However closely a woman tries to conform to social norms, she lives in fear of attack. It can come at any time, from the men closest to her. She faces death by shooting, burning or slaughter with axes -- just for being suspected of having shamed her family in some way. She can be killed for having a supposed 'illicit' relationship, for attempting to marry a man of her choice, or for divorcing an abusive husband.

Women are even murdered if they are raped. Jamilla, a retarded 16-year old girl, was shot dead in March 1999 after she told her tribe that she had been raped. The tribal council of elders decided that she should die as she had brought shame on the tribe.

The women are never given a chance to explain or to clear up possible misunderstandings. Tradition dictates only one way to restore male honour: killing the offending woman.

Ghazala was set on fire and burned to death, reportedly by her brother, in Joharabad, Punjab province, on 6 January 1999, because her family suspected she was having an 'illicit' relationship with a neighbour. Her burned and naked body reportedly lay unattended on the street for two hours as nobody wanted to have anything to do with it.

The government of Pakistan, despite having ratified the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, has systematically failed to prevent, investigate and punish honour killings. It has taken no measures to amend discriminatory laws which obstruct redress, to remove contradictory legal regimes affecting women's rights and to ensure gender sensitization of police and judiciary.

In fact, there is every sign that the number of honour killings is on the rise as the perception of what constitutes honour -- and what damages it -- widens, and as more murders take on the guise of honour killings on the correct assumption that they are rarely punished. The curve of honour killings has also risen parallel to women's increasing awareness and tentative assertion of their rights.

On 6 April 1999, 29-year-old Samia Sarwar was shot dead in her lawyer's office in Lahore, in a killing openly carried out with her mother's participation. Her seeking divorce after 10 years of marital abuse shamed her parents so deeply that they instigated her murder. According to a witness, Samia's mother walked away from the murder "cool and collected as though the woman slumped in her own blood was a stranger".

The isolation and fear of women living under the threat of honour crimes are compounded by state indifference to and complicity in women's oppression. Police almost invariably take the man's side in honour killings or domestic murders, and rarely prosecute the killers.

Even when the men are convicted, the judiciary ensures that they usually receive a light sentence, reinforcing the view that men can kill their female relatives without fear of severe retribution. Specific laws hamper redress as they discriminate against women.

The vulnerability of women is completed by the almost total absence of anywhere to hide. There are few women's shelters, and any woman attempting to travel on her own is an easy target for abuse by police, strangers or male relatives on the hunt for her. For some women suicide appears the only means of escape.

Amnesty International is urging the government of Pakistan to honour their obligations under international law to protect women. This can be done by immediately reviewing judicial practice and criminal laws, for instance the Qisas and Diyat law which allows men to escape criminal prosecution after murdering their female relatives, and make all forms of domestic violence a criminal offence.

All reports of honour killings should be investigated and prosecuted. Wide-ranging and sustained public awareness programs should also be carried out to inform all Pakistanis of women's equal rights. In particular, law enforcement and judicial personnel should be trained in order to address impartially complaints of violence committed in the name of honour.

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