Pakistan's Fiery Shame: Women Die in Stove Deaths

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Stove death is the bitter expression used to refer to the fiery punishment meted out to wives in Pakistan. In Islamabad alone, 4,000 women are believed to have been set ablaze. Shehnaz Bokhari braves death threats to fight the practice.

LOHA BHEI, Pakistan (WOMENSENEWS)--For 19 days Raqia Ghulum clung to life, time and time again relating the horrible events that led to the burns on 95 percent of her body. With little hope of survival in an ill-equipped Pakistani hospital, she begged her siblings to look after her children.

"She did not do it, she told us. Her father-in-law ordered it, saying, 'Give her a punishment she will not forget for centuries: Burn her,'" Malik Hussain recalls of his younger sister's words in the days before her Aug. 6 death.

Hussain claims that Raqia's husband of 17 years, Ghazanfar, had accused the 35-year old of stealing 2,000 rupees ($33.33) from his wallet and beat her with a fire log to elicit a confession. She went to her father-in-law, Sabar Hussain, for help.

Instead, again according to Hussain, the next morning Ghazanfar and his brother Mohammad doused her with oil and lit a match. Neighbors in the small farming village of Loha Bhei, about 30 miles southwest of the capital Islamabad, heard her screams and ran through the dusty dirt tracks to call her brothers.

Police arrested the men, who claimed Raqia's burning was a suicide attempt. Despite repeated pleas by her family, no charges have been filed.

Raqia's two daughters and a son--ages 16, 7, and 2--remain with her mother-in-law. Raqia's family has only been able to see them once--at her funeral.

"We want justice for our sister. They should be burnt, or hanged, or at the least spend their lives in jail so they understand what it is they've done," Hussain says through his tears. "How can anyone do such thing? I don't understand."

Police Often Label Attacks as Suicides

In the last eight years, more than 4,000 women have been doused in kerosene and set alight by family members--predominantly in-laws or spouses--in the area surrounding the capital Islamabad alone. Less than 4 percent survive.

Reasons for burning women vary, but most cases center around failure to give birth to a son, the desire to marry a second wife without having the financial means to support the first and long-running
animosity with mothers-in-law.

There are no reliable numbers for similar cases in the rest of the country, but human rights campagne estimate that three women a day die as a result of "choola," or stove death--a term used by Pakistani human rights campaigners in response to a pattern of perpetrators claiming the victims attempted suicide or died as the result of an exploding stove.

The women are predominantly between the ages of 18 and 35 and around 30 percent are pregnant at the time of their deaths.

"Either Pakistan is home to possessed stoves which burn only young housewives, and are particularly fond of genitalia, or looking at the frequency with which these incidences occur there is a grim pattern that these women are victims of deliberate murder," says Shehnaz Bokhari, chairwoman of the Progressive Women's Association in Islamabad.

There are no burn centers in Pakistan, something the Progressive Women's Association and other women's rights groups have campaigned for over the last decade. Instead, patients receive rudimentary care in existing hospitals from well-intentioned doctors and nurses.

Activists claim that husbands' families often bribe police to label cases as suicides. Courts here are notoriously slow moving. And while the Progressive Women's Association pursues dozens of such cases a year, many of the women simply do not survive long enough for the justice system to complete its cycle and the cases are dropped. Should they manage to recover, the women are scared of further retribution.

There are few shelter homes and plenty of social stigma that prevents women from seeking outside help before a permanently debilitating situation arises. Police are often reluctant to investigate "family matters."

**Bokhari Called a Women's Rights Terrorist**

Diminutive in stature with a cherubic smile, one would hardly pick 49-year-old Bokhari out of a crowd of one of Pakistan's most influential women's rights champions. But since 1996 she has publicly fought the system, dedicated to raising the haunting specter of burned women in front of a largely taciturn population.

"I have my battle scars, but you can not see them," Bokhari says quietly. "I could never remember all the women's names but their eyes haunt me with the knowledge that for every one we help, there are hundreds out there waiting for a miracle."

Her many opponents have called her a "women's rights terrorist," a pimp and a press-hungry egomaniac. Over the years she has fielded death threats and enraged family members storming her Islamabad home, which doubles as the association's headquarters.

Bokhari originally set out to deal with all forms of domestic violence, but in 1994 a quiet, tortured woman from the tribal-dominated Northwest Frontier Province along the border of Afghanistan named Zainab Nur changed her course. Nur's husband had inserted red-hot irons into her genitalia and burned other parts of her body.

"That was the turning point for me. She was the first. When the nurses lifted the blankets and I saw the horrific state of Zainab's body, I fainted," Bokhari remembers with a visible shudder. "He was punishing her because she had dared to complain to friends of his abuse, to confide in someone, to speak out."

Bokhari hounded the local press and the government until Nur was sent abroad for proper treatment. She survived, and now, forced to wear both colostomy and urine-collection bags, works with other women.
Courts eventually sentenced Nur's husband to 10 years in prison. He was released after serving six, providing a rare but hollow victory to women's rights campaigners. Only about 5 percent of abusive husbands and family members are convicted.

Government Does Not Respond

"There is a feudal mindset in every segment of society, traditional norms that [direct violence] towards women," admits Dr. Attiya Inayatullah, currently Pakistan's Minister for Women's Development and Social Welfare.

While the current military government of Pakistani President Gen. Pervez Musharraf has paid extensive--and many believe genuine--lip service to addressing the plight of "chorka" victims, little practical help has come from the authorities.

"One can not expect hundreds of years of tradition to change overnight," Inayatullah says. "It is still nearly enough, but women have more opportunities now than ever before."

Musharraf ordered that 17 percent of seats in the Parliament and 33 percent of provincial and local government assembly seats be reserved for women, allowing them a say in policymaking.

"Women have to push for women's issues," Inayatullah says. "It is not perceived as important to most men."

And to do that, women here will have to do what none have ever succeeded in doing: effectively fight a heavily male-dominated society to change legislation and prevailing social perceptions.

The odds are certainly not in their favor, but the ever-optimistic Bokhari says change is coming. Local media over the last two years have frequently reported crimes against women, often eliciting roars of outrage from across the spectrum of Pakistani society. The U.S.-led war on terrorism has led to greater scrutiny of human rights in America's staunchest South Asian ally.

"I honestly believe that in my lifetime we women will achieve the legal means to ensure our rights," Bokhari says. "Awareness, outside pressure, and a willingness by policymakers to take these issues seriously has never been higher."

Juliette Terzieff is a freelance journalist currently based in Pakistan who has worked for the San Francisco Chronicle, Newsweek, CNN International and the London Sunday Times.

For more information:

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan:

Human Rights Watch World Report 1999--
Women's Human Rights:

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