

# *In the name of honour*

By **Dr Ashraf Ali**, March 30, 2016

A few days ago, a tragic incident in Sahiwal shook the entire city, when a man killed two of his sisters in the name of honour. The accused, Muhammad Asif, made his escape from the scene – leaving Noor Shah, a small farming village some 20 kilometres north-east of Sahiwal, in deep shock.

The distraught father had nothing to say to the people gathered at his home to offer condolences. He had just come back from Dubai to mourn the death of his two daughters and was paralysed by grief and shock. Muhammad Ashraf has been driving a taxi in Dubai for the last three decades to feed to his family back home in Pakistan.

The incident took place day after a Pakistani film director, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, got the prestigious Oscar award for her film on the subject of honour killing. Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy was honoured with the award for her short documentary film: 'A Girl in The River; The Price of Forgiveness'. Sharmeen won her first Oscar award in 2011 for her documentary film, 'Saving Face, which depicts the stories of domestic violence in Pakistan's traditional societies.

Pakistani law allows criminal cases against those charged with murder to be dismissed, if the families of the victims forgive the accused or accept blood money. The two sisters from Chak 67/4R, a small village at Noor Shah, had to pay the price of forgiveness. The district police officer of Sahiwal, Muhammad Baqar Raza, said that the accused, Muhammad Asif, had killed his mother five years ago (in 2011) on the same charges. The accused was jailed, only to be released a few months after the relatives pardoned him.

The screening of Sharmeen's impressive, award-winning film at the prime minister house prompted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to say that "there was no honour in the killing". He promised to take every step for the protection of the women. On the occasion, Sharmeen attributed the prime minister's immediate response "to the power of the film".

Sharmeen's winning of the Oscar award coincided with the Protection of Women Against Violence Bill 2015 becoming a law in the Punjab Assembly. The law declares physical violence, abusive language, stalking, sexual violence, psychological and emotional abuse and cyber-crimes against women as crimes.

According to the law, shelters would be built to protect and provide boarding and lodging facilities to the victims. The law further says that defendants can be cuffed with GPS tracking bracelets, if ordered by the court. Those attempting to remove or tamper with the tracking bracelets could be jailed for up to three months, and fined Rs50,000-200,000.

The women's protection bill becoming a law is a welcome move when it comes to legislation. However, can it make any difference in the lives of the marginalised women living in the male-dominated traditional societies of the country? There is little optimism on this front. Just the formulation of laws can hardly make a difference. This cause needs the strong political will and commitment of the government to implement the law in letters and spirit.

It is ironic that the major criticism of the law came from mainstream religious political parties belonging to all schools of thought. They rejected the women's protection bill, saying it was aimed at destroying the family system in the country and making it a secular state. Addressing a press conference in Islamabad, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) Chief Maulana Fazal Ur Rahman said, "The clauses in this bill will eventually lead to the break-up of the society."

Killing in the name of honour has become common in the traditional, conservative society of Pakistan. Federal Minister for Law Parvez Rashid said before the National Assembly that a total of 933 people had been killed in the name of honour during the last two years. The majority of the cases (602) were reported from Sindh. Some

456 cases of honour killing were recorded in 2013. There was an upward trend in the number of cases the following year, which saw 477 more cases of the heinous crime. More than 500 cases of honour killing were reported in the country in 2015, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP).

According to a poll conducted by the Thomas Reuters Foundation in 2011, honour killings and the rising rate of acid attacks and domestic violence make Pakistan the world's third most dangerous country for women. Judicial experts attribute the rise in the crime rates to the flawed investigation mechanism of the police and the lack of punishment, due to flaws in procedural laws. The fact remains that many of the crimes carried out by the relatives of the victims are never prosecuted. In most of the cases, a killer usually gets pardoned, as he or she normally comes from the same family: the family of the deceased.

As in the rest of the world, March 8 is observed, every year, as International Women's Day in Pakistan. On the same day, speakers from human rights organisations and government functionaries deliver long speeches to renew their commitment to the protection of women's rights. However, the under-representation of women in parliament in 21st century Pakistan is a poor reflection on the government's promise of gender equality and parity. In the Senate, there are only 19 women members in the house of 104, representing half of the total population.

A press statement issued by the HRCP says that the women lawmakers' contribution is proportionately far greater than its numerical strength. Amongst the 20 parliamentary secretaries, there are only three women and the other 17 are men. Unfortunately, none of the 32 standing committees of the National Assembly is headed by a woman. In the Senate, only two of the 30 standing committees are headed by women, and the other 28 are headed by men.

In the last general elections, only 61 female candidates were awarded party tickets from the entire political set-up of the country. If we want to empower women and ensure their mainstreaming, we have to ensure their greater participation in the political sphere of the country. We simply cannot ignore this major section of society, if we want to put the country on the track to progress and prosperity and find a respectable space in the comity of nations.

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