

Murder in *purdah*

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She has written about her experiences in making the documentary because 'only a fraction of the story can be told in a film. Much of what I saw took place behind closed doors where photographing women is strictly forbidden'.

'Islam', said the bearded man, 'was the first religion to give women equal rights'. The Khazi, the leader of Pakistan's Islamic fundamentalist party was explaining the law of *purdah*. 'Men and women', he said, 'must be kept apart — or society will descend into chaos. Women must stay at home — unless their men permit them to go out and then they must cover their bodies so as not to excite uncontrollable passions. This', he explained, 'is *purdah* and *purdah*' — he said — 'makes women free'.

'Free from what?' I asked. 'From having to work outside the home, from the dangers in the world. Free to stay with their children — a privilege few Western women now enjoy. In Islam, it is the role of their men, their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons to protect them. Islam gives women this great privilege. *Purdah*', he repeated, 'makes you free'.

I shuddered. My travels around Pakistan had shown me a different *purdah*. Under the guise of this apparent protection I'd found women incarcerated, tortured and murdered in numbers so alarming that if it were happening to an ethnic group or a racial minority the world would see it as a major violation of human rights. Because it's women it's judged as cultural. And because it's Islam — and religious tolerance is greatly valued by our culture — it's too sensitive to be criticised.

So his claims for the equality of women within Islam felt strangely Orwellian. The *Qur'an* may say they're equal but in Pakistan, as in many countries throughout the Islamic world, men are considerably 'more equal' than women.

Besides, like the *Bible*, the *Qur'an* says many contradictory things. The difference is the strength of fundamentalism spreading and gaining power in the Islamic world, threatening the freedom and human rights of hundreds of millions of women, allowing no escape.

'Doublethink' — I remembered from George Orwell's *1984* — 'is holding two contradictory beliefs simultaneously — and accepting them both'. I'd always known that this would be a difficult story to tell. And that I, as a white Western woman, would be vulnerable to charges of racism, paternalism and cultural imperialism. But if I'd had any doubts, my first day in the country confirmed what Pakistan's Human Rights Commission has warned repeatedly — to deaf ears — that with the growth of fundamen-

talism in Pakistan, increasingly repressive interpretations of Islam now pose a serious threat to that country's women. Sixty million of them.

On that first morning in Pakistan, while interviewing a policeman in what is said to be Pakistan's most sophisticated city, Lahore, a tall man with a fine moustache was led in to the police station with his son, both in handcuffs. He was laughing with his warders. When I asked him why he was there he said 'I killed my daughter. She went off with a man so I killed them both. I'm a Muslim and a Punjabi' — he pointed to his moustache — 'she dishonoured me. If I'd let her live I would not have been able to hold up my head before my neighbours'.

'How did you kill her', I asked. He pointed to the smaller man with him in the cell. 'I told my son to shoot her. He did it'. 'Are you sorry you killed your

sister?' I asked the younger man. 'No', he said, 'I'm proud. I'm ashamed that she dishonoured us but I'm proud of what I did. I did it for our family honour'.

'Is it honourable to shoot an unarmed woman?' I asked. 'There is no greater honour' the father replied.

His daughter, the girl, had been 15. Her name was Fozia.

This was my first encounter with Pakistan's 'honour killings'. In the few weeks I was there several more took place. Fathers, husbands, brothers and brothers in law, all supposedly protectors of their women, all claiming their victims had been having illicit sex, had dishonoured the family and — perhaps most frightening of all — all claiming that as Muslims it was their duty to kill them.

Such honour killings rarely come to court. Domestic disputes are usually dealt with by tribal elders and often it is just such a council of elders, a 'jirga' that has ordered the murder to begin with. This informal court which, in much of Pakistan functions instead of the official judiciary will often sacrifice a girl to keep the peace between tribes. One tribal chief told me: 'Sometimes a woman must be killed to prevent bloodshed between families. In the end', he said, 'it saves lives'.

When such cases do come before the official courts such killers are treated leniently. These are 'honour' killings — and with that as mitigation, most of the killers go free. Prison sentences, when they are given, rarely exceed three years. But even those are in name only. As Hassan, one proud wife-killer from Sindh told us: 'This is a corrupt society. You know very well that no-one who kills stays in jail for more than a year. I paid a bribe and now I'm free'. He paid the price of a buffalo. Last year Hassan went to Mecca and did the Haj. He claims to be a devout Muslim.

This was a man who showed us the murder weapon, still hanging on his wall, who spoke openly before his fellow villagers of how he had shot his young wife in the back while she was working in the fields, who told us he had no regrets and was proud of what he'd done. The villagers nodded their respect. What astonished me was not his crime — there are murderers everywhere — but his confidence that he had the approval of his peers. This is a highly conformist society and without this approval he would not have murdered his wife. This man had no shame, no remorse, no fear of punishment, not by men, not the courts, not by God. He felt completely justified in what he'd done, exasperated even, at my apparent inability to see it his way. 'Look', he said, 'if a rat falls in the well, would you drink the water?'

These murders are not confined to remote regions. We found such 'honour' killings all over Pakistan,

in the countryside and in the cities, in the North West and in the Punjab. In Sindh alone there were more than 350 such killings reported in the papers in one year, but the true numbers are vastly greater and impossible to know. In many places, from girlhood a woman's face is never seen outside. No-one would know if she disappeared.

The best hope for a woman in Pakistan is to be part of the tiny minority of women who can read and write. Such women, like the former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, have a chance to escape and study abroad. The literate few who can read the *Qur'an* for themselves can argue over its interpretation and defend their rights and those of other women.

But for the 75% of Pakistani women who are illiterate — in some areas only one woman in ten can read — there is no way to protest, rebel or escape. Those who try are killed or jailed.

Because at stake is not just the structure of a patriarchal society but the economic right of a father to sell his daughter in marriage as soon as she reaches puberty when she will leave her mother and the 'protection' of one family for the 'protection' of another in her husband's home.

For the very rich there is another complication to this economic dynamic.

In some rich families, such as the Saieds and the Mukhtouns, even a girl's right to marry and bear children is denied.

The reason is that the wealth of the family would be dispersed too widely if the women (who have inheritance rights) were to marry out. So they are permitted to marry only if an available cousin from within the family can be found. This is rarely the case. In one house in Hyderabad I met twenty-one women who'd spent their lives imprisoned within the four walls of their home forbidden even to approach the door. The eldest was over 100. The youngest was 12, a stunningly graceful girl called Afsha, who'd been allowed to go to school before puberty but was now forbidden to leave the house ever again. To keep the family wealth intact she, like the rest of the women there, would never be allowed to marry. 'Do you mind?' I asked her. 'Would you prefer to marry and have children if you had the chance?' The women laughed. They may be prisoners but within the walls of their home they are allowed to watch television, their only window on the outside world. So their laugh was knowing, angry and hollow. 'How can you ask her what she would like? We have no will. None of us has ever been given a single choice in our lives. Not our clothes, not our food, not our future. We are not allowed to make a single decision. How can you ask her whether she'd like to marry? How would she ever know?'

But Afsha was trying to give me an answer and it wasn't about marriage. She pointed to her old blue school uniform hanging on the wall — too small for her now — and brought me her exercise books carefully preserved. 'What I would really like', she said as she opened them, 'would be to continue at school. I want to study. I'd like to be a lawyer. I've seen them on TV. But it isn't possible'.

We couldn't even film Afsha to tell her story. No woman between the age of puberty and the menopause may be photographed. If her face were seen by a strange man she would be judged to have dishonoured her family and would be killed. We left knowing there was nothing we could do. Under the guise of *purdah* her male protectors will imprison her there forever. One man told me, as he shooed his women away like a flock of chickens: 'If a woman in my house were to disobey me and be interviewed by you, I'd kill her'.

Again, such remarks were meant literally, were said routinely without shame or embarrassment, not as a teenager might say 'I'd better get home or my Mum'll kill me'. Puzzlement would cross the speaker's face as though to ask: 'What is it that you find so hard to understand?'

One tribal chief, a liberal politician from Karachi and a devoted follower of Benazir Bhutto, now living in a small town in Sindh, introduced me to his wife. 'I married her for love', he told me smiling, something that in Pakistan is considered rather Western and risqué. 'But if', he said, 'she were unfaithful I would have to kill her'. Pointing to his three young daughters, still children running around, 'that goes for them too' he said.

In one village in North West Frontier province I asked a crowd of men why they lock their women up. 'In Islam', one said, 'it's our custom to restrict women or society will descend into complete immorality and there will catastrophe'.

The honour of the family resides in its women, they explained. They are its vessels. 'If somebody told me my sister had shown her face outside I would obviously have to break her hand and her mouth'.

Violence exists in most societies but this is the only one I have ever visited where the killing of women is carried out with such righteous zeal. Here it is seen as an honourable act, a civic duty. A man kills with impunity, brags about it and looks to his peers for praise.

Sometimes men too are killed but much less often and the dynamic, the process is different. An adul-

terous woman, I was told, must be killed. She cannot be left alive. But a male adulterer may negotiate for his life. Hassan, the wife-killer, tracked down the man he claimed was having an affair with his wife to see what he would pay to be allowed to live. The man had no money nor land to offer. So he gave Hassan his own sister. She became Hassan's second wife living beneath the gun which killed her predecessor, still displayed on the wall. Such bartered women are treated as family slaves. We saw her cowering in a tiny room, terrified that if we found her and filmed her face, she too would be killed. We tried to reassure her, stroked her shaking hand and walked away.

In one village a man took me to a secluded cemetery where seven women of his village had been murdered and buried in the last three years. Usually the bodies of such women are thrown in the river. But sometimes their grieving mothers retrieve them and under cover of night take their daughters to be buried. A mother must not be seen mourning her dishonoured daughter or she too

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will then be shunned by the village. The man explained to me: 'Here, men don't be killed. Only women be killed in this village and in this culture and in this society'.

As we prepared to leave one village a man approached me. He was a university teacher, home for the weekend and though he wanted to talk to me he was visibly frightened of what he was about to say.

'You don't understand these people', he whispered. 'For these men, women are seen as animals, like cattle. They are symbols of a man's wealth, only there for sex and children'. Then he said words which still chill me. 'Here it is believed that man is the spirit and woman is the flesh'. He was distressed, embarrassed, almost crying. He watched my face as his words sank in and nodded. Then he stopped and looked around, scared as if he'd been overheard by some Big Brother. 'I'd better not say more', he said, 'I don't want a *fatwa*. I don't want to be killed'.

Such moments are rare in Pakistan. Few, outside a small band of human rights activists, dare speak out against the tide of repression that is sweeping the country. While Muslim scholars say these practices have no place in Islam — to criticise them in the villages or to denounce them here is to risk the wrath of the local Mullah and be accused of blasphemy — for which the punishment is death. Which is the real Islam, the Islam of liberal scholars, or Islam as it is practiced and preached to millions?

Where have all the Muslim women gone?

Country [†]	Per cent male*	Per cent female	Muslim majority	Very poor country**
Countries with more women than men				
Ukraine	46.4	53.6		
Russia	46.7	53.3		
Kazakhstan	48.2	51.8	99%	
North Korea	48.4	51.6		very poor
Italy	48.5	51.5		
Poland	48.6	51.4		
France	48.8	51.2		
Spain	48.8	51.2		
Germany	48.9	51.1		
Mozambique	48.9	51.1		very poor
U. S. A.	49.0	51.0		
Japan	49.0	51.0		
Romania	49.0	51.0		
U. K.	49.1	50.9		
Vietnam	49.1	50.9		very poor
Tanzania	49.2	50.8		very poor
Mexico	49.3	50.7		
Zaire	49.3	50.7		very poor
Brazil	49.3	50.7		
Argentina	49.4	50.6		
Thailand	49.4	50.6		
Canada	49.5	50.5		
Uzbekistan	49.5	50.5	99%	very poor
The Netherlands	49.5	50.5		
Sri Lanka	49.5	50.5		very poor
South Africa	49.6	50.4		
Ghana	49.6	50.4		very poor
Australia	49.8	50.2		
Philippines	49.8	50.2		very poor
Indonesia	49.9	50.1	87%	very poor
Morocco	49.9	50.1	99%	
Uganda	50.0	50.0		very poor
Kenya	50.0	50.0		very poor
Countries with more men than women				
Burma	50.2	49.8		very poor
Ethiopia	50.2	48.8		very poor
Malaysia	50.2	49.8	53%	
Peru	50.3	49.7		very poor
Venezuela	50.4	49.6		
South Korea	50.4	49.6		
Algeria	50.5	49.5	99%	
Egypt	50.5	49.5	90%	very poor
Nigeria	50.6	49.4	[45%]	very poor
Turkey	50.6	49.4	99%	
Iraq	50.6	49.4	95%	
The Sudan	50.7	49.3	75%	very poor
Iran	50.8	49.2	99%	
Nepal	51.2	48.8		very poor
Pakistan	51.2	48.8	97%	very poor
Taiwan	51.3	48.7		
Bangladesh	51.4	48.6	87%	very poor
Afghanistan	51.5	48.5	99%	very poor
China	51.7	48.3		very poor
India	51.7	48.3		very poor
Saudi Arabia	55.6	44.4	99%	

[†] Countries with populations over fifteen million (1994 estimates). * 1998 estimates from the International Data Base maintained by the U.S. Census Bureau. ** defined as a country with a per capita GNP less than US\$1000 per annum.

While the country's institutions, the courts, the judges, the police and the politicians support and tolerate the abuses against women and let their murderers go free, the prisons are packed with women charged under Islamic laws with the crime of *zinna*. *Zinna* means fornication — sex outside marriage — which is a capital crime in Pakistan. Usually women convicted of *zinna* get a ten year sentence. When you ask them: 'Why are you in prison' they say: 'I am here for abduction'. They mean they were abducted. As they have not been able to prove that they were raped (four witnesses are needed to prove such a charge), they are convicted of having sex illegally. If they even allege they were raped to the police they can and frequently are charged with the further crime of making a false accusation. Such are the taboos about even discussing sex (the *Qur'an* discourages explicit talk of sex), it is almost impossible to collate precise accurate information for their defence in court. As most of them are illiterate they find themselves in jail, often with a small baby, without understanding any of the processes which put them there.

These Islamic laws, the Huddood Ordances, were passed 20 years ago under General Zia, the Military dictator. Since his death countless government and non-government enquiries have concluded that the laws function badly, oppressing women and leading to their false imprisonment but no-one, not even Benazir Bhutto when she was in power, has dared repeal them. This is now seen as one of Benazir's major failures. Like her father she caved in to the Islamic fundamentalists whose political influence has now lead the current Prime Minister to press for Sharia law in Pakistan and a total abandonment of the legal structures left from colonial times. Nawaz Sharif has pledged that he will give his life for Sharia law, a system similar to the one in Saudi Arabia which will make *purdah* enforceable in the courts.

Many of the women prisoners charged with *zinna* under the Huddood Ordances have been falsely accused.

I met one who was sold in marriage, or so she thought, by her father. She signed the paper with a thumb print — and soon had a child. After a quarrel her father accused her of *zinna*, claimed the marriage had never been valid and had her arrested. Now this young girl with a tiny baby faces ten years in jail. With her are women who have married for love against the wishes of their parents. Some have children. Some, when they are released, will be killed by their families. On rare occasions the Pakistan Human Rights Commission manages to persuade a judge to release a woman a day early so that they can spirit her away to a place of safety.

In the long run however there is no place of safety for an illiterate single mother in Pakistan.

The Commission's Chairman, Asma Jahangir, has warned that they're fighting a losing battle. As a lawyer she has seen the courts becoming more regressive. 'Ten years ago the courts would never have dreamt of imprisoning a woman for marrying for love', she says. Now there seems to be a determination to deny women the right to make choices for themselves. She says the latest plans for Sharia law will make the lives of women in Pakistan still worse.

Her courage in speaking out has brought her numerous death threats and she now needs armed protection around the clock.

Asma's sister, Hinna Jelani, is a lawyer too. Last month in her offices, a young woman seeking help to get a divorce from an abusive husband was shot dead by a family member, who managed to get past the security guards. It was the mother who brought the killer in, pretending she had taken her daughter's side. The man with her shot her daughter at point blank range. The father of the girl was a senior official of the Chamber of Commerce in the North West Frontier. These are not ignorant backward people. They are pillars of the community. The girl had dishonoured the family and had to be destroyed — like a gangrenous leg must be amputated.

Muslims have said to me: 'This isn't Islam', and quoted enlightened verses from the *Qur'an*. 'The murders are rooted in tribalism, not Islam. Even the Hud-dood Ordances, which claim to be Islamic laws, are not true Islam'. And then the most common of all: 'Nowhere in the world is Islam practised the way it should be according to the *Qur'an*'.

Yet each and every killer I met invoked Islam as justification and told me the religious leaders, the Mullahs are behind them.

How should any religion be judged? By its practise or by its texts? And when, as in most religions or ideologies, its texts are ambivalent and contradictory, can it really be free from blame?

The *Qur'an* does say that the punishment for adultery must be stoning. But the *Qur'an* also says there must be four witnesses of the adultery. This last detail is often ignored and the woman is killed on mere suspicion.

But in Pakistan it is also easy to find four men, so convinced of a person's adultery that they would

testify to it, even though all they had seen was the two people conversing. Is it enough to say that this is not true Islam when hundreds of millions of women throughout the fundamentalist Islamic world are at the mercy of such ruthless interpretations of a text which they have no opportunity to challenge.?

'True Islam' may not justify such treatment of women, but actual Islam, Islam as it is practised through vast regions of the world tolerates it and even endorses it.

Check through the population statistics of countries throughout the world. In Islamic countries there are almost always more men than women. In most non-Islamic countries, from richest to poorest, there are more women than men. Only China and India, with their long traditions of female infanticide, together with

a handful of smaller countries, join the Islamic world with its missing women. Where are the missing women in Pakistan? In Pakistan there are 105 men to every 100 women. Their life expectancy is roughly the same (59). How is it that so many women — nearly three million — are missing from that population?

Despite all this there is a growing clamour from some quarters for more, not less Islamic law. At a rally of Islamic fundamentalists in Islamabad, I watched thousands of women dressed from head to toe in black and grey, their fists in the air demanding the introduction of Islamic Sharia law. They'd all been bussed in to the rally from their homes by their men, their protectors, to support the campaign. 'They are shouting against the enemies of Islam', a woman next to me explained, 'the Jews, the Hindus and the West'.

More Orwellian images passed through my mind as I watched them enjoying their 'two minutes of hate' before they were bussed home again. I found myself wondering 'do they really believe that *pardah* makes them free?' I had never thought of Islam in this way but I suddenly realised this is the closest to living fascism my generation has seen.

Above their heads in huge letters read the slogan: 'ONLY ISLAM CAN PROVIDE SECURITY FOR WOMEN'.

I remembered the words from 1984: 'War is peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is strength'. My own thoughts scared me. Was Pakistan, I wondered, the most truly Orwellian society I had ever yet seen?

'The girl had dishonoured the family and had to be destroyed'