

# Caged Culture: Honor Killings In Pakistan

*By Azmat F.*

## Introduction

In the shadows of culture and tradition ,behind closed doors a war is waged on the women of Pakistan under the pretext of “Honor killing”. Honor killing is the murder of mostly woman for bringing shame to the family. It’s a permanent stain to the Pakistani society. Despite existing laws and even international condemnation, thousands of women are killed every year, often with little to no consequences .This paper argues that such incidents happen not because of lack of awareness but because of cultural norms, legal loopholes and a messed up system that chooses silence when it matters the most.

## Background & Context

Honor killing is murder of woman by a family member for allegedly bringing shame or dishonor to the family. These acts are often justified using misinterpreted religious beliefs and expectations of traditions. In many cases even saying No and refusal to comply with arranged marriages also results in honor killing. If not killed , forced marriages take place which is worse in its own concept. According the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, hundreds of such cases are reported ,with hundreds likely unreported.

Though Islam does not condone Honor Killings ,perpetrators often twist religious sentiment to justify their cruelty .In reality these killings are just for control. They are believers of a patriarchal culture that sees women just as vessels of family reputation not a human with rights of her own.

## Reported Cases

As in other countries, the exact number of honor killings is not known. The [Human Rights Commission of Pakistan](#) lists 460 cases of reported honor killings in 2017, with 194 males and 376 females as victims. Of these murders, 253 were sparked by disapproval of illicit relations and 73 by disapproval of marriage choice. Additionally, out of the known suspect relationship with victims, over 93% were family relationships.

Although these are most likely only a sample of the actual honor killings that were completed during 2017, it still gives a glimpse into characteristics of honor killings in Pakistan. Sources disagree as to the exact number by year, but according to [Human Rights Watch](#), NGOs/INGOs in the area estimate that around 1,000 honor killings are carried out each year in Pakistan. In 2015 nearly 1,100 women were murdered in honor killings. In 2011, human rights groups reported 720 honor killings in Pakistan (605 women and 115 men), while Pakistan's Human Rights Commission reported that in 2010 there were 791 honor killings in the country, and Amnesty International cited 960 incidents of women who were murdered in honor killings that year. Over 4,000 honor killing cases were reported in Pakistan between 1998 and 2004. Of the victims, around 2,700 were women vs about 1,300 men; 3,451 cases came before the courts. During this time, the highest rates were in [Punjab](#), followed by the [Sindh](#) province. A significant number of cases have also been reported in [North-West Frontier Province](#) (NWFP) and in [Balochistan](#). [Nilofar Bakhtiar](#), advisor to [Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz](#), stated that in 2003, as many as 1,261 women were murdered in honor killings.

*Read more: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honour\\_killing\\_in\\_Pakistan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Honour_killing_in_Pakistan)*

## Highlighted Cases:

Though some cases go unnoticed, On the other hand some cases get the attention from media and public urging Justice. Justice is rarely served but these cases shows a deep crack in morality.

- **Qandeel Baloch(2016)**, born Fouzia Azeem, was a Pakistani model, actress, and feminist activist. She was the first social media celebrity in Pakistan. Baloch was married to Aashiq Hussain, who beat and tortured her. After two years, she fled. On 15 July 2016, she was drugged and asphyxiated by her brother M. Waseem. Waseem confessed to murdering her, claiming "She brought disrepute to their family".

*Read more:* <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Qandeel-Baloch-case-judgement.pdf>

- **Kohistan video case (2012)** , In 2012, a video of two men dancing with women at a wedding in Kohistan led to a tribal death order. Afzal Kohistani, the brother of the men in the video, exposed the killings and fought for justice for years. Despite threats and the murder of three of his brothers, Afzal persisted until he was shot dead in 2019. His family now lives in hiding, fearing for their lives. Activists say authorities failed to protect the victims or hold the killers accountable

*Read more:* <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/3/26/how-a-pakistani-whistle-blower-was-killed-for-honour>

- **Samia Sarwar (1970 – 6 April 1999)**, Samia was killed in her lawyer's office in [Lahore](#) in an honor killing arranged by her parents. She had married a cousin when she was 17 in a match arranged by her family. For several years she lived with the man who abused her, a doctor named Imran. She eventually filed for divorce after deciding to remarry an army officer but faced strong opposition from her family. Sarwar then sought the help of Lahore-based sisters [Asma Jehangir](#) and [Hina Jilani](#), who were well-known human rights lawyers. Shortly afterwards, at a meeting between Samia and her mother at their chambers in Lahore, Samia was shot dead by an assassin hired by her own parents. They had arranged the murder of their daughter because they felt that she had brought shame upon the family by abandoning her husband to marry another man.

*Read more :* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing\\_of\\_Samia\\_Sarwar](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_Samia_Sarwar)

- **Farzana Parveen Iqbal** was stoned to death publicly on 27 May 2014 outside a court in **Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan**. Her father, two brothers and former fiancé were among the nearly twenty attackers. Farzana, who ran away with a man of her own choice, and was pregnant by him, was killed in the tradition of honour killing.

*Read more:* <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/27/pregnant-pakistani-woman-stoned-to-death>

- **The Muzaffargarh Family Arson Massacre ( 2021)**, In central Pakistan's Muzaffargarh district, a man named **Manzoor Hussain** reportedly **burned alive seven family members**, including his two daughters and four grandchildren, because the elder daughter had married a man of her choosing, against her father's religious or tribal expectations.

*Read more:*

<https://www.saudigazette.com.sa/article/612403/World/Asia/Pakistani-man-burns-alive-7-family-members-after-daughter-marries-against-his-wishes>

- **Tariq** allegedly burnt his 40-year-old wife **Shazia** for what he called “disgracing the family's honor” in Chichawatni some 209 kms from Lahore, on Tuesday, police said. Police official Ejaz Aslam said that Shazia had left Tariq a year ago after developing differences over domestic issues and started living with her parents. Aslam said Tariq suspected that Shazia had relations with a man of his locality and on Tuesday he visited his in-laws and doused Shazia with petrol and set her ablaze and fled.

*Read more:* [https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/world/honour-killing-in-pakistan-man-burns-wife-alive-in-punjab-province-501198?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/world/honour-killing-in-pakistan-man-burns-wife-alive-in-punjab-province-501198?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

## Patriarchal Structures

Pakistan is one of those countries where men have the upper hand in almost every area of life. Women don't even have basic human rights, let alone equality. In some places, girls don't have the right to get an education. In rural areas, people believe that education "spoils" women, that it makes

them think they're better than men. They often say things like "Education is temptation for women." And even if their parents allow them to study, after marriage their in-laws often stop them from working or earning for themselves.

Religious scholars also play a major role in shaping society's mindset. For example, one well-known scholar, **Mufti Tariq Masood**, once said that "Girls can be married at the age of 9." Some people genuinely believe women shouldn't have the right to choose who they marry because they "don't know any better." Meanwhile, men can marry whoever they want.

Girls are raised with the idea that they belong in the kitchen, and that their main purpose is to get married once they hit puberty. Mothers are expected to train their daughters to be obedient wives. Women in such areas carry generational trauma, growing up with the belief that they are the property of men. And if a husband hits his wife? She's told it's her duty to stay silent.

If something happens, if a woman is assaulted or attacked, instead of supporting the victim, people start blaming her. Videos go viral online with comments like "Why was she outside?" or "What was she wearing?" And it's not just men, many women also share this mindset. They believe women should stay modest in all situations, no matter what. But Islam clearly says that men should lower their gaze first. Still, the blame always gets twisted and put on women.

In many parts of Pakistan, there's something called the Jirga system, a kind of tribal council led by the elders. If a woman marries someone by choice, the Jirga can decide to have her killed, sometimes both her and the man. The

punishment is often brutal ,like stoning to death , under the label of Zina (pre-marital or extra-marital relations). The leaders of these tribes often have strong political connections, which helps them get away with these horrific acts. To avoid going to court, they pressure the victim's family to forgive them or even blame the victim.

## Legal & Judicial Response

In Pakistan, intentional murder is covered under **Section 302** of the [Pakistan Penal Code](#) (PPC), which carries the punishment of death or life imprisonment. While this technically includes honor killings, legal loopholes have made justice difficult. For years, **Section 309 and 310** ,part of the Qisas and Diyat laws allowed the victim's family to forgive the killer or accept blood money. In honor killing cases, where the killer is usually a close family member, this meant many murderers were legally forgiven and walked free.

In 2016, after the high-profile murder of social media activist Qandeel Baloch, the government passed the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, often called the Anti-Honor Killing Law. It was meant to close that loophole by allowing the state to still prosecute the killer, even if the family forgives him. But on the ground, little has changed. Police often fail to investigate properly, and cultural pressure still silences many families. Other laws like the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010) and domestic violence bills passed in provinces like Punjab, Sindh, and Balochistan show some progress, but there is still no standalone law that directly defines and punishes honor-based violence. Until then, these crimes are still seen as “just murder” , not as the deeply gendered, systemic violence they truly are.

## Conclusion

As someone who has lived within this very society , not just observed it from the outside . I can say this with conviction: honor killing has nothing to do with religion. It's not about faith or belief. It's about power. It's about control. It's about a deeply rooted patriarchy that teaches boys from a young age that they are superior, that they are entitled to obedience, and that women exist to serve them.

From childhood, girls are trained to walk within invisible lines. We're told what to wear, how to speak, who to trust, when to laugh, and when to stay silent. Any step outside those lines ,even something as simple as choosing who to love or how to live , becomes a threat to a family's so-called "honor." And in the twisted logic of this system, that "honor" is worth more than a woman's life.

What hurts most is that many of these men truly believe they are doing the right thing. They see themselves as protectors , guardians of family values but in reality, they are enforcers of control. Control that comes from fear. Fear of losing dominance. Fear of losing the illusion of power that society has handed to them at birth.

It's not honor. It's ownership. It's patriarchy dressed up in tradition, backed by silence, and enforced by violence. And unless we start calling it what it truly is , not a cultural quirk, not a religious misunderstanding, but a systematic dehumanization of women , nothing will change.

## **Authors Note**

*I'm a 19-year-old Pakistani girl, and I wrote this not just to inform, but to remember every voice that was silenced in the name of honor. I write this not as an outsider but as someone shaped by the same society that I critique. I carry their stories with me, the ones who couldn't finish theirs. This is for them , and for all of us still learning how to speak. I hope this starts conversations we've been avoiding for far too long.*