

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > Pakistan > Women (Pakistan) > Women, fundamentalism (Pakistan) > **“The last week of October, my uncle’s granddaughter, Zainab, barely 18 years (...)**

Diary

## **“The last week of October, my uncle’s granddaughter, Zainab, barely 18 years old, was shot dead by her brothers, Inam and Hamza Ahmed”**

“Official statistics admit to 1261 honour killings in 2006 in Pakistan...”

Tuesday 16 December 2008, by [ALI Tariq](#) (Date first published: 16 November 2008).

If cheating in bed was always settled by the bullet, many of us would be dead. Gerald Martin’s new biography of Gabriel García Márquez reveals that *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* was based on the murder of the novelist’s friend Cayetano Gentile in Sucre in 1951. He had seduced, deflowered and abandoned Margarita Chica Salas. On her wedding day Margarita’s husband was told that she was no longer a virgin. The bride was sent back to her family home. Her brothers then found Gentile and chopped his body into pieces. Márquez blamed the socio-moral dictatorship of the Catholic Church. But of course it is usually women who are killed for breaking codes of sexual conduct. There have been several recent cases in Britain. Banaz Mahmod, a 20-year-old of Kurdish origin, was murdered in Surrey at the behest of her father because she’d left an arranged marriage and her father didn’t approve of her new boyfriend. Iraq has lately seen a spate of such murders. Last month acid was thrown at three women in Basra who were talking to a male friend. Yet Iraq once had the highest proportion of women integrated into every level of society of any Arab country.

And then there is Pakistan. In 2005 Pervez Musharraf pushed through legislation making honour killing a capital offence yet official statistics admit to 1261 honour killings in 2006 and half that number again the following year. The actual figures are probably much higher, since many deaths go unreported. ‘Women are considered the property of the males in their family irrespective of their class, ethnic or religious group, and the owner of the property has the right to decide its fate,’ Tahira Shahid Khan of Shirkat Gah, a group that campaigns for equal rights for women, reported in 1999. Domestic violence too, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, is ‘considered normal . . . A sample survey showed 82 per cent of women in rural Punjab feared violence resulting from their husbands’ displeasure over minor matters; in the most developed urban areas 52 per cent admitted being beaten by their husbands.’

Consider the following. A man dreams his wife has betrayed him. He wakes up and sees her lying next to him. In a fury he kills her. This really happened in Pakistan and the killer escaped punishment. If dreams are to be treated as justification for an honour killing, what woman is safe? Since the police and the judicial system regard murder in the family as a private affair, most cases don’t get to court even if they’re reported. Society, it’s said, needs to protect its foundations. So mostly we rely on the information collected by the Human Rights Commission and on courageous lawyers like Hina Jilani and Asma Jehangir, two sisters both of whom have received numerous death threats.

In 1999, Hina Jilani was in her office with Samia Sarwar, a mother of two from Peshawar seeking a divorce from her husband, when Sarwar's mother burst into the room with two armed men in tow and had her daughter shot dead. In 1989 Samia Sarwar had married a first cousin. For six years he beat her and kicked her. But after he threw her downstairs when she was pregnant with their second child, she went back to her parents' house. The minute she told them she wanted a divorce they threatened to kill her. Yet they were educated and wealthy people.

One widely reported murder this year was that of Tasleem Solangi, the 17-year-old daughter of a livestock trader in the Khairpur District of Sindh. She wanted to go to university and become a doctor like her uncle, but instead agreed to marry a cousin in order to settle a protracted family dispute over property. Her mother, Zakara Bibi, tried to stop her, but Tasleem was determined. Her father-in-law, Zamir Solangi, came to collect her and swore on the Koran that no harm would befall her. A month after the marriage, Zakara had a message from her daughter: 'Please forgive me, mother. I was wrong and you were right. I fear they will kill me.' On 7 March, they did. She was eight months pregnant. The Koran-swearer accused her of infidelity and said the baby was not his son's. She went into labour, her child was born and instantly thrown to the dogs. She pleaded for mercy, but the dogs were set on her as well and the terrified girl was then shot dead. On this occasion at least there was an inquiry. Her husband was charged with Tasleem's murder and is currently awaiting trial.

Another case much discussed this year is that of five women in Baluchistan who were buried alive in Baba Kot village, about 250 miles east of Quetta, the Baluch capital. Three of the women were young and wanted to marry men they'd chosen for themselves; two older women were helping them. Three male relatives have been arrested. According to the local police chief, the brother of two of the girls has admitted that he shot three of the women and helped bury them, though they weren't even dead. The trial date is awaited.

Traditionalists have always considered love to be something that brings shame on families: patriarchs should be the ones to decide who is to be married to whom, often for reasons to do with property. If you fall in love, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Urdu poet Mir Hassan explained (more than once), you will be burned by its fire and perish. That is what happened in the Punjabi city of Wah in late October. Now Wah has half a million inhabitants and Pakistan's largest ordnance factories, but it was once an idyllic village almost floating on water. The streams and lakes that surrounded it attracted the Mughal emperor Jehangir, who stopped there on his way home from Kashmir, and is said to have exclaimed 'Wah!' or 'Wow!', thus giving the village its name. Before that it had been called Jalalsar after one of my forebears, Sardar Jalal Khan, a leader of the Khattar tribe around 800 years ago. His successors wanted to please the emperor and agreed to the name change. I can't imagine that the decision was taken without a fierce struggle (one faction is said to have been deeply hostile to the arriviste Mughals), but those speaking sweetnesses to power won the day.

Jehangir built a beautiful, domed rest-house in Wah, surrounded on all sides by flowing water. In 1639, his son Shah Jehan supervised the landscaping of beautiful water gardens and pavilions. More than half a century ago, I used to play hide and seek here with my cousins. The pavilions were ruins by then, which made them even more magical on a moonlit night. A cousin swore that the ghosts of the Mughals could be seen in the mist on a winter night, but nobody believed her. The caretaker was extremely sharp-tongued, although when talking to my uncles and aunts, he masked his intelligence in language of exaggerated humility. We were never deceived and threatened to expose him if he gave us a hard time.

Other ghosts lurk there now. A mile and a half from the old village, my youngest maternal uncle, Sardar Ghairat Hyat Khan, built himself a house and moved out of the decaying manor house we'd all shared. My Kashmiri great-grandmother, Ayesha, moved with him. Before she became completely

blind she was the best cook in the world and my visits were always rewarding. Shortly before I left Pakistan for Britain I went to say goodbye to her. She said: 'I feel a moustache. Is it really you?' 'No,' I replied trying to make my voice deeper, 'I am a stranger here, but I was told your bakarkhanis tasted like heaven.' Bakarkhanis are a crumbly, Kashmiri version of the croissant. I've not been to his house for a long time but I'm told it's in a state of disrepair and crumbling like the bakarkhanis.

In the last week of October, my uncle's granddaughter, Zainab, barely 18 years old, was shot dead by her brothers, Inam and Hamza Ahmed. Zainab apparently had a lover and despite repeated warnings refused to stop seeing him. She was on the phone to him in her grandfather's house when her brothers pumped seven bullets into her body. I don't know whether her mother, Ghairat's oldest daughter Roohi, whom I last saw when she was about ten, was part of the plot. Whether or not she was involved, I find it deeply shocking that my uncle allowed the young woman's body to be buried that same day without at least insisting that a First Information Report be lodged at the local police station, let alone demanding an autopsy. Zainab deserved at least that. I am told that Ghairat is old and frail, that he was angry and wanted to ring the police, but was talked out of it by his daughter and other members of his immediate family, who collectively recoiled at having to accept the consequences of what they had witnessed. Perhaps his faith in a just and merciful Allah was not as strong as he used to claim. Whatever the reason, it's unacceptable. The body should be exhumed, the murderers arrested and put on trial, as the law requires.

---

## **P.S.**

\* From the London Review of Books:

[http://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n24/ali\\_01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v30/n24/ali_01_.html)

\* Tariq Ali's latest book is The Duel: Pakistan on the Flight Path of American Power.