

Beyond honour: reclaiming justice and humanity in Pakistan

Nabila Kanwal | 29th July, 2025

In the heart of Baluchistan, a crowd gathered, watching in silence as two young lives were ended in the name of “honour.” Their only crime: being accused of bringing shame. This was not a hidden act, but a public spectacle, a chilling reminder that in Pakistan, “honour” can still become a licence to kill.

But my question is how many more lives must be lost before we admit that “honour” has become a weapon, not a virtue? Each year, the silent toll of honour killings grows in lives cut short, families shattered, and justice denied. This is not just a statistic; it is a national emergency that demands our collective conscience and urgent action.

Most often, it is women who pay the highest price. In Pakistan, the concept of “honour” leads to the tragic loss of countless women each year, reflecting a persistent tradition that presents serious obstacles to justice and human rights. Honour killings, defined as the murder of women to protect family reputation, remain a troubling form of gender-based violence in Pakistan.

Taking on responsibility often brings a sense of authority, as legal consequences are often insufficient and societal norms prioritize family reputation over individual rights.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan recorded around 1,961 honour killings from 2004 to 2022, but the actual numbers are likely much higher due to underreporting.

Section 299 of the Pakistan Penal Code defines honour killing as an offence aimed at preserving honour. Sections 300 and 302 categorize it as murder and specify the punishment.

Despite the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2004 and the Anti-Honour Killing Act 2016 aiming to make these offences non-compoundable and state matters, notable loopholes remain. The Qisas and Diyat law illustrates this clearly, allowing pardons and reducing accountability, as seen in the Qandeel Baloch case.

In various regions of Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, informal justice mechanisms such as jirgas are crucial for resolving disputes, particularly in contexts where formal opportunities are restricted. Nonetheless, these forums are largely characterized by a male presence, with a notable lack of representation for women.

This gap is more than just a theoretical idea. In March 1999, a troubling incident occurred involving a 16-year-old girl in Parachinar, who was sent back to her tribe after being raped. The jirga determined she had dishonoured her tribe, leading to her execution in front of tribal members.

Honour killings occur in various settings, not limited to tribal or rural areas. Samia Sarwar, 29, was shot dead in her lawyer's office in Lahore while pursuing a divorce. Her own mother, a medical professional, was involved in the heartbreaking choice to end a life.

Honour killings are wrongly justified by religion, yet neither the Quran nor Hadith endorses these actions. Islam strictly forbids the taking of innocent lives (Surah An-Nisa 4:93), and religious authorities consistently

denounce honour killings, emphasizing that justice belongs to the legal system.

The actions stem from enduring customs that emphasize patriarchal control over women's autonomy, rather than authentic religious beliefs, as shown by their absence in many Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia and Malaysia.

The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees key rights, including the right to life and liberty (Article 9) and protections for women (Article 25). The leniency in honour killing cases dates back to British colonial rule. The 1990 amendments incorporated Islamic principles like Qisas and Diyat into the legal system, allowing for family pardons. The 2004 and 2016 Acts strengthened the judicial system by making honour killings non-compoundable.

The legal system has flaws; courts sometimes grant exceptions, and victims' families may choose to forgive offenders. The Qandeel Baloch case illustrates ongoing challenges, as her brother was initially sentenced but later acquitted by the Lahore High Court due to procedural issues. This situation reveals ongoing problems in the criminal justice system, including blood pardons, poorly crafted legislation, and narrow legal interpretations.

The Constitution of Pakistan ensures important rights, such as the right to life and liberty (Article 9), along with provisions for the protection of women (Article 25). Historically, the leniency observed in cases of honour killings can be traced back to the era of British colonial rule.

The amendments of 1990 brought Islamic principles such as qisas and diyat into the legal framework, permitting family pardons. In contrast, the Acts of 2004 and 2016 reinforced the judicial system by rendering honour killings non-compoundable. Nonetheless, the legal system is not

without its flaws, as courts occasionally grant exceptions or victims' families choose to forgive offenders.

The Qandeel Baloch case, where her brother was initially sentenced but later acquitted by the Lahore High Court due to procedural issues, exemplifies these persistent challenges. This situation highlights persistent issues within the criminal justice system, such as blood pardons, inadequately developed legislation, and restrictive interpretations of the law.

Pakistan has made commitments to numerous international conventions and treaties, which require the country to protect women's rights and tackle gender-based violence in a meaningful way.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) stand as essential pillars in the ongoing struggle for equality and justice worldwide. Pakistan must eliminate discriminatory practices and ensure equal protection for women as per these agreements.

Pakistan, as an Islamic state, promotes spiritual equality for both men and women. Islam forbids intentional killing, including honour killings, asserting that justice belongs to Allah or the courts. Islam promotes ethical principles for all individuals and prohibits causing harm or taking the life of a woman for failing to fulfil expectations. The Quran's guidance is applicable to all genders.

The antiquated notion that ties family honour exclusively to the behaviour of women and rationalizes violence needs to be reformed. These actions are a more significant wrongdoing than the one under scrutiny. Education, awareness, and open dialogue are crucial for

dismantling these harmful conventions. Elders, teachers, and religious leaders must define the true meanings of Islam and the law.

The recent tragedy in Baluchistan, the murder of Qandeel Baloch, and the killing of a 13-year-old girl in Bolan district highlight the critical necessity for justice in Pakistan to be both inclusive and compassionate. Honour killings should be firmly denounced, no matter where they originate, whether from a jirga, family, or misguided customs. To put an end to violence and ensure justice, it is essential to uphold the law, rectify existing gaps, and shift societal attitudes and beliefs.

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