

In the name of honour *Huram kig*

By Anwer Mooraj

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NEWSPAPER readers in Karachi must be getting a little turned off by seeing the same old subjects popping up week after week: the LFO, human rights abuses in Kashmir, poor education standards, cheap transport for the masses and corruption in high places.

This writer has been guilty of having dipped his wick in at least three out of the five themes, all of which appear to be incapable of solution. Fully aware of the reader's low boredom threshold, he would, however, crave the reader's indulgence one more time, because there appears to be a fresh stirring in the political wind of Sindh, which might, once and for all, tackle the issue of karo-kari head on.

On July 2, the very day when honour killing claimed the lives of two people in Shikarpur and Gabar Junejo village, and a 14-year old boy in Badin, the governor of Sindh, Dr Ishratul Ibad, asked the chief secretary's recommendations on amending the existing laws which protect karo-kari. The reason why critics believe some kind of action is forthcoming, is because the governor represents a party that is wholly committed to eradicating this savage practice.

It is not very clear if there is a need for amending the existing penal code. No law now in force recognizes honour killing as an acceptable practice to be treated with understanding and tolerance. The eminent jurists whom this writer has consulted all claim that the so-called honour killing must be treated as murder and the perpetrators tried under Section 302 of the penal code of Pakistan.

What the governor should do, instead of getting bogged down in bureaucratic gobbledygook and endless deliberations of sub-committees, is to call a conference of all the senior police officials in the province and tell them that the government is now determined to eliminate the menace of karo-kari, and that in future any policeman who looks the other way when a brother kills his sister, a father his daughter and a husband his wife, often on more of suspicion of fornication, will be immediately suspended from service and prosecuted.

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It is also a matter of record that when that poor unfortunate woman in Meerwalla was subjected to a four-hour gang rape by a group of hooligans on the instructions of a vindictive panchayat, the only member of the National Assembly who expressed his disgust and publicly registered his protest, was the Jamaat-i-Islami chief, Qazi Hussain Ahmed.

Where were all those chameleon-like Muslim League turncoats who were returned to power on the promise of improving the lot of the people? And all those PPP liberals who wax eloquent about the rights of women and the minorities, but whose real objective is to get the president to exonerate their leader of all the charges levelled against her and to get Asif Zardari out of prison? Both groups appear to be mindful of the norms and values of a patriarchal society that believes that honour is something that is defined by men, and women who defy these standards must suffer the consequences.

The president and the top military brass are totally against this practice which, on an average, accounts for 1,100 female deaths a year. But they appear to be unable to do anything about it. Dr Ishratul Ibad has cast the first stone. If it lands on its target, he can rest assured that he has the support of the large majority of the people.

Pakistan is apparently not the only country where this barbaric, stone-age custom is practised. Allegedly, hundreds of women are killed every year on this count in Gaza, the West Bank, Turkey and other parts other parts of the Middle East. Egypt and Jordan, with their own records of dirty secrets, are also fellow travellers on the road to infamy.

And some of the cases that I came across during my research gave me the impression that Jordan was slightly ahead of other Muslim countries when it

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The police may have a point, but there is evidence to suggest that when the member of a victim's family has tried to file an FIR, as happened on two occasions in Mirpur Mathelo, he faced considerable resistance, either because the station house officer just couldn't be bothered, or because the killers had allegedly greased his palm. The policeman's readiness to register an FIR has often to do with the importance of the person making the request.

There is an unfortunate misconception that honour killing has the blessing of the religious orthodoxy in Pakistan. This is not quite true. The rightist Jamaat-i-Islami party, though it supports Islamic laws that human rights groups consider to be discriminatory to women, publicly declared three years ago that honour killing had nothing to do with Islam. The Muslim faith does not advocate or allow the killing of women in the name of honour. That was a categorical statement.

In fact, it is not the mullahs but the feudals and a section of the so-called 'progressive' political elements in the country who support honour killing. When women's rights groups took to the streets in well organized demonstrations four years ago, after that dreadful episode which involved the gunning down of Samia Sarwar in the office of the HRCP in Lahore by a man accompanying her mother, the leader of the Awami National Party took the floor in

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comes to sanctifying honour killing, possibly because of Article 341 of Jordanian law.

This article considers murder a legitimate act of defence when "the act of killing another or harming another is committed as an act in defence of his life, or his honour. Or somebody else's life or honour." The significant word in this article is 'honour'. And as every student of law knows, the definition and interpretation of honour differs from country to country. In Sicily it usually refers to a betrayal of trust or breaking a vow of silence, and in Japan, where men are known to rip out their entrails, it is associated with failure and the disgrace that failure might bring. In Jordan it means that a woman has tarnished the family image.

There is a body of opinion in the Hashemite Kingdom that believes this law should be repealed as it is giving a bad name to a growing democracy and the most modern country in the Arab world.

As it is, the western media is always on the lookout for sensational stories which show the Muslim world in a poor light, like the story filed four years ago of a young man in a Jordanian village, who shot his sister in their drawing room.

Her crime was that she had supposedly been raped, which was, of course, her fault. CNN did considerable damage when it did a live coverage of another slain sister, showing a crowd of villagers celebrating the brutal killing of the girl as she lay dead in the street, and a brother who didn't suffer the slightest pangs of pain.

One only hopes that Pakistan takes the lead and stamps out this barbaric custom. The eyes of the world are on this country and it would be good if the West had something nice to say about it for a change. Mr governor, keep at it. All sensible thinking men and women are behind you on this issue.