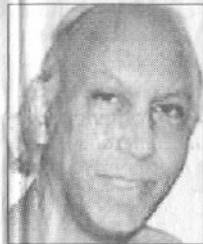


# Brutalisation of v

COMMENT



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*Anti-women and anti-minorities prejudices permeate all sections of society and the police and other administrative organs of the state*

Human Rights

Duty 11-29/10/05

Balochistan nearly erupted into civil war when a woman doctor, Shazia Khalid, was raped while on duty in Sui. Baloch tribal leaders described the incident as a stigma to their honour that a woman had been raped in their area of influence and blamed

THE BRUTALISATION OF WOMEN IN Pakistan is deeply rooted in the macho or martial culture that prevails in the country. However, undoubtedly ever since the late General Zia ul Haq embarked upon his Islamisation project, this culture has been conferred greater respectability courtesy rabidly misogynist legislation such as the law of evidence and the rape law, both based on jurisprudential texts from medieval Islam.

Two cases have been in the limelight for the past several weeks. These concern Mukhtar Mai and Dr Shazia Khalid. Mukhtar Mai, an ordinary peasant woman, was gang-raped in 2002 in a remote rural community of southern Punjab or rather the Seraiki belt as it is now commonly described. The gang-rape was sanctioned by the village council, which decided to punish her for her brother's alleged illicit sexual liaison with a girl from a family of higher social standing. The punishment fits into what can be described as 'honour crimes'. Such crimes are avenged by families or even communities and include killings and vicious injuries.

The case highlighted internationally crimes against women in Pakistan, prompting General Pervez Musharraf's government to take stern action against the culprits. Six men were tried and found guilty by a court which awarded them the death sentence. However, some days ago the Multan Bench of the Lahore High Court ruled that there was insufficient evidence against the men. Consequently Faiz

Mastoi, the chief of the village council, and four others were set free while the death sentence of the sixth man was reduced to life imprisonment.

Mukhtar Mai was present in the court and wept upon hearing the decision. She has vowed to continue seeking justice. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan and other rights organisations have expressed great disappointment, urging the government to adopt procedures which plug all loopholes in the law and take a firm position on such crimes.

An interesting turn in the case came on March 11 when the Shariat Court decided to suspend the decision of the high court, stating that it would try the culprits under Islamic law. Since the rape took place in front of many people, perhaps it will be possible to fulfil the requirement of having four pious male witnesses to the crime.

In the absence of such witnesses, the complainant can be severely punished under the *hudood* law. Sometimes in the early 1980s a blind female servant raped by a landlord and his son was found 'guilty' by the court of making a false accusation of adultery.

A further twist to the Mukhtar Mai case came when Chief Justice Nazim Hussain Siddiqui of the Supreme Court decided to adjudicate the case himself, suspending the ongoing proceedings of both the Federal Shariat Court and the Multan Bench of the Lahore High Court. So, it is maybe premature to speculate about the final outcome of this case.

A few weeks earlier, the southern province of

# women

Pakistani Army officers for the outrage. General Musharraf publicly condemned the crime but added that he did not believe that Captain Hammad, an army officer suspected of the rape, could be the culprit because an officer of the Pakistan Army could not act in such a bestial manner!

Dr Shazia Khalid was unable to identify anyone during the identification parade because she had been blind-folded at the time of the rape. She has subsequently said that she and her husband could not live safely in Pakistan because their families might want to kill her for dishonouring the family name.

The third case which has attracted less attention but is thoroughly shocking is that of a Christian woman from Karachi, Honey, who fell in love with a Muslim man, Faisal Raees, and married him. She soon began to be savagely treated by her husband who was hell-bent on converting her to Islam. Her sad plight has been reported by the national press including *Daily Times* in February 2005. According to Dr Fazia, the medical examiner in the hospital where Honey sought help, her nose, breasts and genitals had been bitten. She confirmed that in her professional career she had never come across another case in which a woman had been treated this violently (*Daily Naya Akhbar* of February 21, 2005). When the neighbours moved Honey to a hospital, still bleeding in her unconscious state, her brothers were threatened that all the family members would be killed and her younger sisters would be abducted

and raped if the matter was reported to the police.

The incident happened on February 20 when Honey's elder brother Richard visited her. When he protested Faisal's cruel behaviour towards his sister, Faisal hit him and then put a gun to his head, threatening to kill him if he moved. He bound Richard with a rope. After that he began to beat Honey, his wife, with an iron rod, breaking some of her bones and teeth. In front of her brother, he removed her clothes. He bit her nose, breasts and genitals. She lost consciousness.

The entire family is now hiding in a small house of relatives, and the alleged culprit is free; the police have not even registered a case against Mr Raees.

Pakistan is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women but a formal commitment is hollow in the absence of any serious intent to attack this widespread evil. The anti-women and anti-minorities prejudices permeate all sections of society and the police and other administrative organs of the state. Therefore it is important that a long-term policy is adopted, aimed at eradicating misogynist and biased attitudes and behaviour deriving from feudal and tribal cultural roots and indeed dogmatic jurisprudential texts.

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