

Lahore: Relatives with blood on their hands

Wednesday 8 September 2010, by [FISK Robert](#) (Date first published: 8 September 2010).

Eight of the women who sought refuge in Hina Jilani's Lahore shelter died later at the hands of their families. In the second part of our investigation, the lawyer explains how authorities covered up

For other articles in this series, see:

["Honour Killings": The crimewave that shames the world](#)

[Jordan: One woman's nightmare, and a crime against humanity](#)

"So far, I've lost eight women from my shelter," Hina Jilani says. "One went out for a job in town, she left our shelter, got on a bus – and was gunned down by her brother. Her name was Shagofta, she was in her late twenties. She had already married the man she loved but the parents had disapproved. Her brother got straight off the bus and went to the police station and gave himself up. But his father – Shagofta's father – 'forgave' him. So he was let off. And nothing happened."

Ms Jilani is a tough, brave lawyer with a harsh way of describing the "honour killing" – the murder – of young women. She has to be tough, given the death threats she's received from Pakistan's Islamists. She speaks with contempt for the families who murder their women – with even more contempt for the police and the judges who allow the killers to go free. Pakistan has the grotesque reputation of being one of the leading "honour-killing" countries in the world.

"Some of the women in our Dastak shelter in Lahore left us after assurances from their families that they would not be harmed," Ms Jilani says. "We always tell the women not to accept these assurances. In the Lahore High Court, I was sitting there when the judge was insisting that a women from our shelter should go back to her parents. The more the judge insisted, the more the woman resisted. He made her sit in his chambers and then in the court. And then, as she left the High Court gate, they shot her down. The judge said nothing."

Before he resigned in 2008, President Pervez Musharraf was asked why nothing had been done to alleviate the plight of women in Pakistan. There was no money available, the General said. But Pakistan had to spend money on nuclear and conventional weapons "in order to live honourably". National honour, it seemed, mattered more than the lives and honour of the women of Pakistan.

In Ms Jilani's office in Lahore, where fans whirl against the heat in small rooms crammed with legal files, faded documents and trilling telephones, an armed guard sits at the door. "The eight women from our shelter who were murdered – this has become a big scandal," Ms Jilani says, her voice rising as her anger rekindles itself. "There is a law in this country – it's always the family that conspires to kill, so if the father or brother kills, the family forgives him and there's no charge. The law says there can be a 'compromise' at any stage without any evidence coming into court. The trial simply stops if there is a compromise. The court has to give its permission for a compromise – but it

always gives permission. This means an automatic acquittal. This means that there is no stain on the murderers.”

Ms Jilani went to the police after Shagofta was killed by her brother on the Lahore bus. “We asked them what they were doing. They said the family had forgiven the brother. ‘We have no power now to investigate,’ they said. I sent this to the Commission on the Status of Women – and they took this case up with the Inspector General of Punjab. So far, there has been no response. I sent letters to the IG myself. Then he said that the ‘investigation’ was still going on. But there was no ‘evidence’ – of course not, because the girl was killed, as they say, ‘in the heart of the family’.”

Ms Jilani sighs, often. Sitting in the chair opposite her desk at the end of her office, listening to her furious indignation, I get the impression – indeed, I have the absolute conviction – that she faces a set of Islamist laws going back to the time of another dictator, Zia al-Haq, that are constantly undermining her lawyer’s soul.

“There was a girl here and she wanted to marry against her parents’ wishes. So her brother killed her husband-to-be. He went to jail after being sentenced to 14 years. He wanted to go after the girl, his sister. She sought shelter here with us. Her family blame her because her brother is in jail.”

“To this day, we don’t know what to do with the girl. She is now doing secretarial work here in our office. She has enough economic independence. But her fiancé’s family have no sympathy with her because their son is dead. And her protection is the duty of the state – not mine. She’s been here in the office for two years now. Our office guard brings her here and back to the shelter every day.”

One of the most savage of all the “honour” murders was committed in the very office in which we are sitting. A decade ago, it brought world publicity and caused international outrage – which had not the slightest effect. The killing of Samia Sarwar still haunts Ms Jalani. “She was shot where you are sitting,” she said. “I saw the holes in her head. Her brains were on the wall behind you.”

Most “honour” crimes are committed by the poor and deprived. But 29-year-old Samia was the daughter of Haj Ghulam Sarwar, a rich man and head of the Peshawar chamber of commerce in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan. Her mother was a doctor. Samia was married to her aunt’s son. The couple had two children, the elder nine years old.

She claimed that her husband beat her constantly and wanted to leave home, and her father invited her to return to her family home – on the condition that she did not remarry. But Samia fell in love with an army officer, Nadir, told her parents about him and asked them to secure a divorce.

Mr Sarwar refused, on the grounds that this would split the family. Then Samia eloped with Nadir. Threatened by the father, she fled to Lahore – and to Ms Jilani’s shelter. Under the rules of the Dastak shelter, Samia’s mother was told her daughter was in Lahore.

“First an official came to see me from the North West Frontier Province,” Ms Jilani recalls. “He was a scoundrel. He demanded that Samia return to her family. I said, ‘That’s her decision’. Her father came to Lahore. I told Samia that he wanted to see her. Her hands were trembling – like this.” And here Ms Jalani shakes her hands over her desk. “She told me, ‘Madam, they will kill me, they will kill me.’ You learn to believe what these women say. I believed her. I always tell my colleagues: never think the woman is exaggerating her fears.”

Samia’s parents appointed one of Ms Jilani’s legal colleagues to represent them to plead for a meeting with their daughter. Samia refused. Then her mother called by phone, offering to give her divorce papers so she could marry Nadir. Samia – fatally, as it turned out – trusted her mother’s word. According to Ms Jilani, Samia told her: “I will see my mother – but she must come alone. I will

only meet her in your presence.” The meeting was set for mid-afternoon in the lawyer’s office. The armed guard was told to ensure nobody arrived with a weapon.

“I was sitting here and she was sitting there, where you are. We were chatting about her case. The office staff were leaving – it was around 4pm – and suddenly the door opened and this woman entered with a man. I didn’t recognise the man. Someone from my office brought them both. But there had been a security lapse as the office was closing. The woman said, ‘This is my driver.’ I looked up and said, ‘You can send your driver away now – come and sit down.’”

“Samia didn’t apprehend any danger. She said ‘Salaam aleikum’ to her mother. And just as she said that, this man whipped out a pistol – in a split second, just as Samia was greeting her mother – and shot her. I was still sitting down and I felt the bullet go past my ear. He shot Samia in the head the first time, then in the stomach. I saw her fall down.” Ms Jilani says she collapsed in shock but managed to press the security alarm.

“I could see Samia was dead – she had a hole in her head and her brains were coming out. Some of my staff came. But the mother, she just looked at her daughter. Then she turned round and walked out. She and the man with the pistol went to the door, and I shouted, ‘Call the police.’ The man was holding another of my lawyers at gunpoint. Then he shot at the office guard, who fired back. The gunman was carrying an ID card which said he was an official driver in the North West Frontier Province.”

To this day, Ms Jilani is overwhelmed not just by the failure of security in her office – it was presumably the armed guard who let the uncle in – but the growing suspicion that the police were somehow involved. “When I called the Inspector General,” she says, “he said he’d be here in a minute. Then after 10 minutes, the senior superintendent of police was here. The mother first went to a local hotel and then ran away to Peshawar. Within an hour, the police knew who she was – but they let her leave the city. The police must have known. In fact, the only police officer who tried to investigate this was transferred to another city.”

Ms Jilani went to court – “an ideal case for prosecution,” she thought – but discussions dragged on for two years. Samia’s family even claimed that Ms Jilani had abducted the girl and had her killed. Then the police accepted that her mother was not present in the lawyer’s office – a palpable untruth. Finally, the mother and father and the man who was still Samia’s husband filed a “compromise” on behalf of all their children, forgiving the killing. The judge accepted the compromise.

The family later claimed Samia’s body from the police station and took it to Peshawar for burial. Two days after her murder, the local Women’s Action Group, said they would hold prayers for Samia, even without her body. “I asked Maulavi Farouq Mawdadi to say the prayers,” Ms Jilani remembers, “and there were up to 300 women there, and Mawdadi conducted our prayers on the Lahore Mall. There were many police watching us – but then some of the policewomen and a few policemen joined in our prayers. This was a turning point.”

Then what happens? “The court said there was a ‘technical problem’ with my appeal. I went right up to the Supreme Court but they said I was a pro formal complainant. They said, ‘You are not an aggrieved party.’ It became a burning issue. There was a resolution put before the Pakistan Senate condemning honour killings.”

So what did happen? The resolution of Senator Syed Iqbal Haider, of the Pakistan People’s Party, was supported by 19 of his colleagues. But the rest of the house opposed the resolution. Mr Haider was himself threatened and Ms Jilani received many death threats from Islamist groups.

Nadir, the man Samia wished to marry, was dismissed from the Pakistan army for “lowering morale”. He is now married with two children and is believed to be living in Britain.

Ms Jilani has been told that Samia’s mother has “gone mad with grief and guilt”. When I visited Peshawar and asked to visit Samia’s grave, I was told that its location was “unknown”.

P.S.

* From The Independent. First of a four-day series investigating a global scandal that destroys many thousands of lives every year, Wednesday, 8 September 2010:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/robert-fisk-relatives-with-blood-on-their-hands-2073142.html>