

GLOBAL FORUM

*The Death of Qandeel Baloch**By Rozina Ali*

On July 4, in what would be the last post on her Facebook page, Qandeel Baloch wrote, "It's time to bring a change because the world is changing. Let's open our minds and live in the present." The post is eerily ominous. The Pakistani model and social media star seemed to have been pleading with society to not see her as an affront to public morals but a pioneer charging forward.

Soon afterwards, Baloch's brother killed the 26-year-old in their home in the province of Punjab. Implicit in reports of Baloch's death were justifications for why she had been killed in a patriarchal society: she was a model who wore "inappropriate" clothing; she was "Pakistan's Kim Kardashian"; she posted suggestive pictures of herself on social media; she posted selfies with a Muslim cleric while wearing his hat.

It is the latter that appears to have pushed Waseem Azeem, Baloch's brother, to murder her for "dishonoring" the family. In June, Baloch visited a Muslim cleric, Abdul Qavi, in his hotel room, posting pictures of the two of them on her social media pages. The image ignited controversy and Qavi was suspended from religious committees and councils. The cleric denied any wrongdoing, saying that Baloch

had insisted on the meeting and wanted spiritual guidance; Baloch said Qavi had wanted to see her. She seemed to enjoy poking fun at the unarticulated hypocrisy of Pakistan's male-dominated society. But she also knew the cost of doing so. Baloch reportedly asked the local government for protection after she received death threats.

It became obvious there was no safe place for her, not even her home. Her brother confessed to killing her because she brought "shame" to the family. "I have no regrets," he told journalists in a press conference.

There have been many women, unnamed or unknown, before Baloch who have been murdered or attacked because they have allegedly brought "shame" on the family. In June, a mother burnt her daughter to death for marrying her boyfriend. In May, 15-year-old Ambreen was strangled and burned for helping her friend elope. In April, a Karachi man stabbed his 16-year-old sister. In March, a man executed his two sisters because he "doubted their characters."

Supposed "honor" killings are a regular occurrence in Pakistan. It doesn't matter what a woman wears, who she takes pictures with, or what she says. Women are at once supposed to preserve the honor of the family, while being so dispensable that over a thousand can be killed in a year and society—and sometimes the law—will argue whether the murderers were justified. It is a commentary in itself that one week the country will rightly reel from the death of an 88-year-old man (the great humanitarian Abdul Sattar Edhi), and in the next week will find the death of a 26-year-old woman predictable.

Honor killings have been on the rise in the country. A report by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) found that 1,100 women were killed in honor killings last year, up from 869 in 2013. According to the head of HRCP, honor killings are also spreading beyond rural areas to urban centers like Karachi and Lahore—places where the state has a presumably stronger presence. But the rise in these killings parallels the jump in attacks on other targets: musical artists, writers, and journalists. Baloch was an intersection of the two, pushing boundaries of entertainment and social norms.

Such killings are relatively recent in Pakistan's history, and though they have not been an embedded feature in Pakistani society, they are threatening to become so. The country has a problem of patriarchy, but also one of extreme intolerance, as different groups try to lay claim to the country's identity. In the backdrop has been a country at war for at least fifteen years, unraveling cities and social structures. A generation of men and women is growing up in the midst of frequent bombings and regular violence. As an HRCP official told me, the brutality of attacks on women is worsening. It seems there is a growing belief that not only do these women deserve death, but they deserve a tortured death.

Baloch was the breadwinner of her working-class family, and her father called her his "son" as a form of pride. Whether it's because of this, or the outrage among certain circles over her death, Baloch's murder is meeting an unusual response. While under Pakistani law the victim's family can pardon the killer (which often happens if victims and killers are related),

the state has barred Baloch's family from doing so, and her father is pressing ahead with murder charges. Police have widened the investigation to another of Baloch's brothers and, surprisingly, to Qavi as well. Qavi, being a Muslim cleric, almost seemed untouchable in the case; after all, in the hotel photo controversy, he represented a religious authority against the word of a "shameful" woman.

All of these actions lead to a seductive hope that the investigation will yield punishment, and will be a win for women in the fight between clergy and women, between patriarchy and women. But at the very least, what comes next may have lasting reverberations that will reverse the rise of such murders, will champion women's lives as valuable, and finally see men as complicit in preserving a family's and country's honor as much as women. After Baloch was killed, Qavi told CNN that her death "should be a lesson for all those who point fingers at someone's honor." One hopes the court orders him to look at his own finger.

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