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To Be a Woman in Pakistan: Six Stories of Abuse, Shame, and Survival

By Zara Jamal

Interviews with a handful of the country's 88 million women and girls



Brides-to-be wait during a mass wedding ceremony in Karachi. *Reuters*

According to a [2011 poll](#) of experts by the Thomson Reuters Foundation Poll, Pakistan is the third most dangerous country for women in the world. It cited the more than 1,000 women and girls murdered in "honor killings" every year and reported that 90 percent of Pakistani women suffer from domestic violence.

Westerners usually associate the plight of Pakistani women with religious oppression, but the reality is

far more complicated. A certain mentality is deeply ingrained in strictly patriarchal societies like Pakistan. Poor and uneducated women must struggle daily for basic rights, recognition, and respect. They must live in a culture that defines them by the male figures in their lives, even though these women are often the breadwinners for their families.

Quietly, slowly, in piecemeal legal reforms, female empowerment is coming in Pakistan. You meet inspiring women daily here. Sympathetic employers sometimes give protection and assistance, as do other women who've fared better. NGOs and charitable organizations try to help empower women, but not all women take advantage of these resources. They fear their husbands, attracting unwanted attention, somehow hurting the honor of their families, or, often, they simply do not know that help exists. With female literacy at 36%, many women are too uneducated to know their rights.

A difficult irony for women in Pakistan is that, should a victim speak up about physical or sexual abuse, she is seen as having lost her and her family's dignity. Many rapes go unreported as the victim fears she will become worthless in Pakistani society. Often, women will turn to their employers; families they can trust. It's a typically unnoticed form of charity but one that can be crucial to their survival.

These are the stories of six poor, working women of different ages, backgrounds, and life experiences in the Pakistani city of Karachi, where I grew up and where I met them. In interviews, which I have translated, edited, and condensed below, they told me about their lives and struggles within a cycle of poverty and, often times, violence.

These women have consented to share the stories and photos so that the world might better understand the challenges they face. For their safety, I have not used their full names.

Ayesha, age 18



Every poor girl wishes for more education, for the opportunity to learn and go to school; for a childhood. But many of us are not that fortunate. The day my brother was born was bittersweet; I was no longer allowed to go to school. Due to the increased household responsibilities, my father told me that I must stay home and eventually begin to work.

On the night of his birth, while my whole family was celebrating, I went to my uncle's house to get more bread. I didn't know a young man was there. In the empty home, he took advantage of me; he did things that I didn't understand; he touched my chest. Before I could realize, there was a cloth over my mouth and I was being raped. I was having trouble walking back home; I felt faint and I had a headache. This happens a lot in villages. Young girls are raped, murdered, and buried. No one is able to trace them after their disappearance. If a woman is not chaste, she is unworthy of marriage. All he did is ask for forgiveness and they let him go as it was best to avoid having others find out what had happened. He didn't receive any punishment even though he ruined me. People may have forgotten what he did, but I never forgot. Now, he is married and living his life happily. I blame my own fate; I am just unlucky that this happened to me.

When I began working, I was afraid. I guess it was natural, I was only ten. I consider myself lucky though. In the homes where I worked, I was responsible taking care of the children; getting them ready, feeding them and playing with them. I used to have so much fun. I felt like I was a child among them. I was able to relive my own childhood. Soon, I became so used to working that I began feeling safer and happier at work than in my own home and village. Our village is full of intoxication and indecent and disrespectful men; men like my own father.

At the moment, we live in Karachi in a small home with one room and the floor is broken. Whenever I would visit my parents, either I would witness abusive arguments between them or something far more disturbing. Since I was young, my father had always beaten my mother shamelessly. My entire family is aware of my father's abuse; it is no secret. My mother is very obedient; she never says no to my father. She leaves home for work at 8 am and only returns at midnight. Even if she is tired, she does everything to make him happy; she runs our home and cooks whatever he wishes. All the men in our village beat their wives, it is a norm and women continue to let it happen. Maybe it is fear, maybe it is desperation, I never quite understood.

“He had no mercy, not even when I was pregnant. I have miscarried three children.

As sad as it may sound, part of me does not fear the physical abuse anymore. I fear much bigger things. As I grew older, my father changed. He began smoking, drinking, and maybe even using drugs with my income. He began sleeping next to me. In the middle of the night, he would touch me inappropriately and remove my clothes. Because I was afraid, I would act like I was sleeping and would turn the other way. After his first time sexually abusing me, every night I slept in my home in fear. I kept dreaming that my father is raping me. I get so scared. I have heard that if you don't share your dream with someone else, then it never happens. So I never shared what happened to me.

After these incidents, the only person I could turn to was my employer. She is aware of what happens in my home and I know I can trust her. In January, I feared I may have been pregnant, and she took care of all my medical expenses without letting anyone find out. Thankfully, I was not, but she was ready to take care of me if I was. A woman's reputation is so fragile in Pakistani society. I have requested for her not to let me go for vacation time, and to keep me in her home where I feel safe. Without judging me, she accepted me, and has given me a place in her home like a daughter; a place even my own parents could not give me.

Rehana, age 37



My life is no different than that of any other woman living in poverty in Pakistan. My husband is abusive and I am the primary breadwinner. I am striving to get my children educated as they are my last hope. The only difference in my story is that I could have maybe had it all if one incident had not occurred in my life.

I grew up in a home where my parents were barely earning enough to support our family of 14. My father used to make medication boxes while my mother worked in homes as the help. We learned to survive on very little.

When I was about 14, I was engaged to Nasir. Being with him was the best time of my life. He was a kind man and earned a decent living. Even though we never really spent much time together, I felt like I loved him. I guess no one ever forgets their first love.

Then, one dreadful night before I got married, a few young men snuck into our home in the middle of the night, around 3 am. They tied up my parents and beat them. I was sleeping with my two sisters in

the next room. As I was the eldest, they took me out of my bed and tied me up my legs. I knew they wanted to rape me. I explained that I would lose everything if something happened to me. I grabbed a knife and told them that I would kill myself if they continued. Finally, they decided to let me go. I was saved, but the damage was already done. When Nasir and his family heard the news, I was considered "used" and was no longer worthy of him. Just last night, six boys snuck in to a home and stole everything they could. When the parents resisted, they threatened to take the daughter with them. This is very common in our neighborhood. It is so easy for a young girl to lose her dignity and to stain her reputation because of uncontrollable circumstances.

When I turned 15, I married my husband, Fakhir, out of desperation. His mother asked for my hand in marriage as there was no one to cook in their home. I married for their convenience. I am Fakhir's second wife. He said he loves his first wife, Rukhsana, and has two children with her. I think he uses my salary to support her as well. Fakhir is unreliable, he goes to work sometimes, and takes the rest of my salary for gambling.

We fight over money all the time. I want to educate my children. My time to spend on myself is gone. Now I just earn for my children and our home. On pay day, if I do not give my husband my salary, he won't let me leave my home and he will beat me. However, I secretly keep the fees and rent because I don't trust what he would do with it. I am the primary breadwinner. When I had my last baby, she was only seven months old, and I had to get back to work. Even though doctors have told me to stop working because I have a worm in my stomach, I know I cannot rely on Fakhir. The medication I was prescribed costs 3000 rupees [\$33 U.S.], so I cannot afford to treat myself either.

The domestic violence started two months after my marriage, and hasn't stopped even fourteen years later. Broken limbs, broken teeth and miscarriages became a routine for me. Why he beats me, I don't know. Maybe he sees me as an animal with no rights, or a punching bag for his frustrations. He surely does not see me as a living and breathing human being. Wherever I have worked, I have felt as though I have been treated like a person, not the way I am treated at my home. I realize that I deserve to be considered a human being.

Nargis, age 18



When I was young, we lived in our village with our entire extended family in a three-bedroom home. My mother used to raise cattle. She would sell the milk and run our home with her income. My father didn't help. He never really contributed, he was too selfish. Before he married my mother, he was married to her sister. When she passed away, my family told my mother that she was best to take of her sister's children, so she married my father. We are a family of eight, so our home survived on close to nothing.

When I was a child, I was never able to buy anything I wished for, but I had the chance to attend school. I was really passionate about learning. My favorite teacher, Kiran, loved me. She would tell me to sit in her chair and help her teach other children. I even used to wear a scarf like her and would assign homework to the others. Those were my best memories. I was able to learn Urdu. At the moment, my employer helps me learn English.

In our home, women are the breadwinners, while my father and brothers work when they feel like it. My father collects the income that we all earn. He is wasteful, he will go out with his friends and won't return for four or five days sometimes. He never fulfilled his responsibilities as our father, never earned for us, and he didn't want us to go to school. My father was uneducated, so he won't let anyone else ever study. I wish my childhood lasted longer than it did.

My parents sent me off to work in homes in Karachi when I was six or seven years old. In my village, at the age of four, young girls first learn to do sweeping and cleaning dishes. At the age of six, we learned to iron and wash clothes. By the time we turned ten, we'd learned to cook everything.

When I was really young I got hurt because my brother was playing cricket and the bat had ripped my head open. I needed stitches. My parents took me on a bicycle to the hospital and the doctors gave me medication. In the area where I live, we didn't have any real treatments, so my mother did a lot of healing at home. She used onions, oil, dough, and bandages. In our home, we never really saw any

happiness. Our parents were never able to bring peace in our home. My father was very abusive. He used to beat my mother and I witnessed it since I was young.

I remember once when I was cleaning, I was sweeping the floor and my father told me to come to the store to help out. I told him I was coming, I wanted to finish what I was doing. He got impatient and he picked up a wooden stick with sharp edges and he hit me with it. I was five at that time. All I remember is screaming and crying.

My most horrific memory was when I was eight or nine years old and I saw my father beating my mother for no apparent reason. He began beating my mother with a faucet and an iron rod. After he was done, we all lay down to sleep. I slept next to my mother. I remember being so afraid, I couldn't sleep all night. I remember my mother telling me, "no matter what happens, promise me you won't scream." My father had kept the faucet and iron rod under his bed. My brother and I snuck out in the middle of the night with the iron rod and faucet and buried it far away in the sand outside so my father would not be able to use it. In the morning, he woke up so angry that he picked up a wooden log and beat my mother, accusing her of stealing the items from under his bed. I ran up to him and to give him a hug to calm him down. My father stopped finally. He loves me the most.

Memories like these are unforgettable. Growing up in an abusive environment and seeing the torturous ways of my father has led me to lose faith in my own future. My only ray of hope comes from my work environment where I am loved and treated as a child. My work makes me feel worthy that I am may be special. Maybe there is something better out there for me.

Nazneen, age 41



There is only one time in a woman's life where she is truly free and that is when she is a child. She can play and laugh. We were three sisters. My younger sister used to go to school and my older sister married at a young age. I studied a little bit, I know how to read and write a little. I studied until fourth

or fifth grade but I don't remember much. We lived in a home made out of mud and sticks in our village, called Thatta. We came and spent a few years in Karachi to do our schooling and lived in a rental home. Then we returned to our village. My parents both used to work, my dad used to earn more income. My father did labor work, he earned well enough. My mother used to work in a school and take care of kids. When mom left work, I began working and had to leave my education.

After childhood, as soon as a woman gets older, household responsibilities begin to weigh her down and then she marries. If she is unfortunate, she marries the wrong man and is burdened for the rest of her life. When I got engaged, I started sewing from home to make money and prepare for my own dowry. If we did not provide sufficient dowry, there was a chance the marriage would not happen. As soon as I turned 16, I was married to my cousin, Nabeel. Within three years of marriage, I had my son, Samir. He was born prematurely at seven months and I had to have an operation. Until ten months later, my husband never came to get me. I went back to his home by myself.

Everyone began mistreating me when I returned. My mother-in-law and his sisters didn't give me spending money, food, and worst of all, no one loved my son. I began earning my own money and taking care of my son in their home. Nabeel may never have beaten me, but he managed to scar me emotionally. He never accepted our child as his own. He married another woman behind my back and created a whole new family with his new wife. They have children together. His mother and sisters were all involved in his second marriage. How could they do that to their own niece, their own cousin? My life has been filled with misery after marriage.

I came to live with my family after this incident. When my son Sameer turned three, I went off to work. At times, I would not be able to see him for a month. He calls me by my first name, and calls my mother ammi. I am the primary breadwinner in our home, making merely 6500 rupees [\$72 U.S.] a month and I barely cover our expenses of food, medications, and clothing. Sameer has only studied till fifth grade as I could not afford the fees for higher learning. There is a reason why the poor remain uneducated generation after generation; we simply cannot afford it. It isn't that we do not want to study; it is simply because we can't.

I have seen many hardships in my lifetime, but nothing compares to the flooding that occurred in our village two years ago. I was in Karachi working when the flood was on its way to Thatta village. My son, mother, and sister were able to get on a bus and leave before the water arrived. They weren't able to take anything except for the clothes on their back. My father remained in Thatta during the flood and he was in the water for three days. The government workers charged 20,000 rupees [\$220 U.S.] for each person they saved from the water. Many poor people could not afford saving their loved ones. Even rescuing survivors is a business in Pakistan.

When I returned to my home, everything was lost; all our valuables, the money I had been saving for years, and our home had fallen apart as well. We received no help from the government. They gave each home about 20,000 rupees to survive, when our losses were well over 200,000 rupees. My family and I had to rebuild our home ourselves. In these difficult times, our village developed a deep sense of

community. Even if we have one meal and we didn't know what we would eat the next day, we still shared it with one another and prayed that God would give us something more the next day.

Haseena Bano, age 53



My life transformed when my father was kidnapped about 30 years ago. He was a rich and successful businessman. We were considered a wealthy family. Due to our lack of education, we were never able to claim the money or gold he had left behind in his bank accounts. The bank informed us that all his money had been donated to charity. Soon, we fell into dire poverty. After this tragedy, we lost our mother due to high blood pressure. She left behind 12 children who had to learn to survive on their own. Being the eldest daughter, the household responsibilities fell onto my weak shoulders.

When I turned 17, I fell in love with Ali. We ran away and got married. We were so happy together, but soon his parents forced us to get a divorce, as they disapproved of me. After Ali, I married Fazal, but this time it was arranged. We moved to Iran, where I had five beautiful children whom I love dearly. We seemed so happy; I thought we had it all, but it was not enough for Fazal. One day, he told me my sister had passed away. Devastated, I went on my way to Karachi. When I arrived, and saw my sister well and healthy, I was confused. Fazal promised to come get me in a few weeks, but he never came; a notice for divorce did. He kept my children. My youngest was two at the time, today she is 12. He married a younger woman, Khatija, who used to frequent our home as a family friend. I loved Khatija like a daughter; I never expected she would betray me this way.

The pain of losing my children was far greater than that of losing Fazal. After this incident, I began having panic attacks, depression, and kept crying for my children. I spent two years in a charitable mental institution, first as a patient, then after I recovered as a worker. The facilities are usually not very good in state-run hospitals. But I wasn't prepared for the mental abuse and violence. One of the

patients was beaten with wooden sticks until her nose was broken because she disobeyed the rules. Fear was our treatment and medicine.

During this time, my eldest son, Shahid, came to visit me. Fazal tried to stop him; but he came anyway since I was very ill. When I saw him, he was speaking English; I could barely understand him. I never imagined feeling so distant from my own child. He brought me clothes, money, and medications. He held me and asked me to come with him. How could I return to Iran? I had no connection with his father. Plus, I would have asked him to stay, but I do not have any money or a home to support him. My home is my workplace.

At the moment, I am much better and work in homes as help. I take care of children and do the cleaning. Everywhere I have worked, I have been taken care of and I have been given a lot of love, maybe more than I have received in my own family. My employers give me new clothes, allow me to play with their children like I would with my own, and give me a warm place to sleep at night. When there is a wedding in their home, they give me new clothes to wear and include me in the festivities.

I hope to find love again. Even though I am in my 50s, I hope I find someone to grow old with. Life has been lonely for many years. My dream is to save my money, and have my own home one day, where my children can visit me. If my dream does come true, I know that I will be able to die in peace.

Salma, age 39



In Pakistan, if you are poor and uneducated, you are just waiting for the day where your life will end; each day is spent trying to find the motivation to survive.

At the moment, I work in a home where I am treated with respect and I get a lot of support for my family. While at work, I am the happiest, returning home is where I am the most afraid.

Every day with Farooq was filled with fear, each minute was painstakingly long, and the physical and emotional wounds remain unhealed. I would wake up early every day to iron his clothes and prepare his breakfast before I left for work. He spent the day at home. If I ever ran a little late, the consequences were dreadful. He hit me so much; sometimes he would give me a black eye or break my arm. Other times, he would take me out on the street and beat me publicly. He had no mercy, not even when I was pregnant. I have miscarried three children because of him. I have two children, one daughter and one son, who was a twin; Farooq killed his brother by kicking me in the stomach. He would ask me to go live with my parents during my pregnancy. Sometimes in the middle of the night, out of nowhere, he would attack me in front of my children. When I shower, I look down at my scarred body and I cry.

Farooq collected all my salary and used it for alcohol and drugs. One day, he accused me of sleeping with another man and divorced me. Being a divorced woman is shameful in Pakistani society. Even though I was suffering with him, I tried to save our marriage. He asked me to do *halalah* and told me he would marry me after that. According to the concept of *halalah* in the law, if a woman wants to re-marry her ex-husband, she must marry another man and consummate that marriage. I did what he asked. I did my *nikkah* [marriage] with another man. I only did this so my children could have their father's name. I went through the process and divorced the other man, and Farooq still didn't marry me again. He said you aren't my wife, you are my whore now. He seems to enjoy finding new ways to torture me.

I thought he would leave and that all this was finally over, but he remained in my life. He kept all my clothes, my furniture, my dishes, my sewing machine, and my washer. He still tried to sleep with me. If I refused or talked back, I would get beaten. I was scared for my life. He would tell my daughter, Seema, that he would throw acid on me if I married another man again. Fine, he is uneducated, but is he also inhumane?

I only have one dream for my future, and that is to start a new life outside of Karachi. I want to work hard, educate my children, and expose them to a life that is nothing like what I have experienced. My parents tell me to leave and to work it out with Farooq as they believe a divorced daughter is a burden even though our home runs on my income. In our culture, women look best in their homes with their husbands. Parents feel weighed down when they return home. I never belonged in my own home or my husband's home. I want a new beginning; I want to show all those people that hurt me that I can create a whole new life on my own; if not for myself, then for my children.

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