

ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

TRUSTEES

Bryn Barnard
Joseph Battat
Mary Lynne Bird
Steven Butler
William F. Foote
Kitty Hempstone
Pramila Jayapal
Peter Bird Martin
Ann Mische
Dasa Obereigner
Paul A. Rahe
Chandler Rosenberger
Katherine Sreedhar
Edmund Sutton
Dirk J. Vandewalle

HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot
David Hapgood
Pat M. Holt
Edwin S. Munger
Richard H. Nolte
Albert Ravenholt
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

LZK-10
SOUTH ASIA

Leena Z. Khan is a former Institute Fellow who studied the intersection of culture, customs, law and women's lives in Pakistan.

Another World Is Possible

By Leena Z. Khan

Leena Khan's fellowship in Pakistan, where she was studying the situation of women under the strictures of current and previous Islamic governments, was cut short by increasing terrorist activity in Karachi, where she was living. She returned to the United States and delivered this report on her fellowship to Institute Members, Trustees and friends assembled for their annual meeting at Monmouth University, West Long Branch, NJ, on June 8, 2002.



Leena Khan

When I began my fellowship in Pakistan one year ago, most people in this country had not heard of Pervez Musharraf. Today, he is a household name and an international statesman. He has led Pakistan through perhaps its most difficult period in its 54-year history.

When I journeyed to Pakistan, little did I know that I would be forced to leave so abruptly. And, little did I know that the events that were to unfold in the upcoming year would not only change the face of Pakistan, but of the entire global community. Today I'm going to talk about the implications of Islamic extremism and its threat to the women's struggle for equality in Pakistan.

I had to make the difficult decision of returning now prior to the completion of my fellowship for a number of reasons. Eight months ago I saw an assertive leadership with an enlightened pragmatism reflecting the vision of Pakistan espoused by its founding father—Mohammad Ali Jinnah. However in the months following President Musharraf's decision to join the U.S. war against terrorism, the law-and-order situation within Pakistan, particularly in Karachi where I was living, took a turn for the worse. There were bomb blasts, daily sectarian-motivated killings and frequent strikes called by various religious and political parties. Karachi would become paralyzed following these incidents, followed by an eerie calm—giving the superficial impression that all was fine.

Over the past year, I invested a tremendous amount of time and energy in establishing contacts and settling into my life in Karachi. In a country like Pakistan, contacts don't come easy, and at least initially I relied on a number of personal connections.

Throughout the year I reminded myself that I had several things working in my favor—I had relatives living in the city, I did not stand out as a foreigner, and I spoke the local language. Perhaps for these reasons, I was invited to a number of social, religious and political gatherings. I was also able to gain the trust of women who otherwise would not be willing to talk to foreigners.

I didn't want to make the choice to leave until I absolutely had to. Even when

I wrote to Peter just under a month ago about my decision to return to the States, I did so with ambivalence mixed with disappointment, sadness and an overall feeling of leaving things unfinished. I had just begun to start peeling away the layers in understanding women in relation to history, culture, religion and social standing. But I followed my inner voice, which was saying that it was time to come back as my mobility, study and sense of objectivity were being affected.

Today the sense of insecurity within the country is greater than ever before in the Musharraf era. I along with most Pakistanis have helplessly sat back and watched the deterioration of law and order in the country. For me the May 8 Sheraton bomb blast was a disturbing wakeup call—a grim reminder that Pakistan may be losing its own war against domestic terrorism.

The general sense among most Pakistanis is that the government is unable to perform its most fundamental function—that is to protect the life and property of its citizens. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the terrorists have hijacked the name of religion and have taken the citizens of the country hostage. What this all amounted to was a prevailing sense that the country was about to blow up, if it had not done so already.

* * *

In an environment where diverse religious elements were brandishing their own versions of militant Islam, all women were bound to suffer. I journeyed to Pakistan to find out whether there was a women's movement in the country, and if so, what direction it was heading in and what progress had been made for women over the past 50 years.

Over the past year, what I observed in Pakistan was not a "movement" in the traditional sense but an *emergence of consciousness* by a significant minority of the public toward the condition of women. The origins of a women's movement can be traced back to 1949, when Begum Rana Liaquat Ali Khan, wife of Pakistan's first prime minister, formed the All Pakistan Women's Association—or APWA. Then came the Women's Action Forum—or WAF, which was formed in 1981.

WAF was most active in the 80s. At that time WAF held intensive protests and demonstrations against anti-women laws promulgated by Pakistan's most brutal military dictator, General Zia-ul Haq. The mid-80s represented a major turn in the history of the movement, as women took on a greater role in activism.

While WAF today has lost the edge that it had in the 80s, I met a handful of women still involved in activism and continuing the debate on discriminatory laws against women. One extremely discriminatory law still on the books is the Hudood Ordinance formulated in 1979 by General Zia. While the Hudood Ordinance covered theft, drunkenness and bearing false witness, the part most harmful toward women is the Zina Ordinance—which deals with adultery and rape.

The fact that this law is still on the books is a grave concern for most thinking women. Many women feel that until the law is repealed, the increase in women's freedom is largely superficial. The most disturbing aspect of the Zina Ordinance is its treatment of women victims of rape. Pakistani law and legal procedures are heavily weighed against the victim. As I mentioned in one of my newsletters, if a woman files a report with the police that she has been raped, she will most probably be treated as the criminal rather than the victim. Under section 8 of the Ordinance a woman who has filed a rape case must prove that four pious adult Muslim males witnessed the act. If she cannot do so, she is considered to have admitted having illicit sexual relations and will be charged with *zina*. The maximum penalty for *zina* is death by stoning for married persons and 100 lashes for unmarried persons.

In recent months, the case of Zafran Bibi has forced women's groups to refocus their attention to the ordinance and call for its immediate repeal. Zafran Bibi lived in the Kohat district of the North West Frontier Province when her husband was sentenced to prison for 24 years in a murder case. One day while she was alone in the fields her husband's brother raped her. When she discovered that she was pregnant she filed a rape case with the police.

Like most women who file a rape case in Pakistan, Zafran Bibi was treated like the criminal. The police registered a *zina* case against her saying that she filed the case too late. The charge also stated that since she was two months pregnant at the time of filing, she was a habitual criminal. The final judgment, which appeared in the press, was even more troubling. It sentenced Zafran Bibi to death by stoning, because she

failed to meet the impossible burden of proving a rape had occurred.

Due to timely intervention by women's groups, Zafran Bibi was given immediate relief by the North West Frontier Province government. Her life has been spared.

A few weeks before I left Karachi for the U.S., I attended a conference organized by the *Aurat Foundation*, a women's NGO focused primarily on capacity-building. The conference was aimed at forming strategies to repeal the Hudood Ordinance and was attended by men and women, including several justices. The participants at the conference, along with most educated Pakistanis, agreed that General Zia misused the name of Islam to gain the support of religious groups to legitimize and prolong his military coup and repressive rule.

In the year 2000, the National Commission of the Status of Women, a statutory organization, was formed under a presidential mandate with the objective to end all forms of discrimination against women. The Commission has been given the mandate to review women-related laws and policies taken by successive governments. In recent weeks the commission has set up a sub-committee to review the Hudood Ordinances and make recommendations to the government.

* * *

Many urban women do have more access to power, whether in terms of education, class or economic resources, than ever before. What I saw, unfortunately, was that such women still are the exceptions, rather than the norm. While many urban women are furthering their education, marriage is still the central focus of a young woman's life. Even in the upper classes, a girl will be told by her parents that their greatest wish is to see her settled in her own home—meaning her husband's.

While marriage is still a priority for most Pakistani women, so is employment. In the cities economic necessity has pushed an ever-growing number of women from all classes into working outside the home. In the larger cities such as Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad, women are seen working in almost all walks of life, in medical and legal offices, universities, restaurants, banks and even the running of their own businesses. Women in rural areas typically work, on average, 14 to 16 hours a day, most of which is spent laboring in the fields.

Although I have often felt that the pace at which Pakistan is changing for women is painfully slow, there are some positive indicators of change. Under President Musharraf's Devolution Plan—whereby he delegated central-government powers to subsidiary or local bodies, an unprecedented 33 percent of seats were reserved for women in local governments. In last year's local-body elections, I witnessed encouraging results—over 48,000 women councilors stood elected countrywide at the end of the plan.

While women politicians are not new to Pakistan, this time around there was a difference. Previously the handful of women in politics belonged to the elite class and had dynastic power linkages. Today the newly elected officials hail from more mainstream backgrounds, even from the rural areas.

The *Aurat Foundation* was instrumental in the political mobilization of women in last year's elections. Soon after the current government made its announcement of the reserved number of seats for women, the *Aurat Foundation* began a year-long campaign aimed at mobilizing women to take a greater role in the political process and run for public offices.

The message that the Musharraf government is sending to women is a positive one—in fact, most women I've met feel he is more sympathetic to their cause than even Benazir Bhutto.

Participation by women in Pakistani politics still has a long way to go. Most of the elected councilors are not sure about the extent of their powers and authority. Their roles are largely undefined and still evolving. It's with time and extensive training that women councilors will grow more confident and make their collective presence felt. Currently it is too early to judge their performance and gauge how much difference they will be able to make in the future.

* * *

Some say that the patriarchal system found in Pakistan does not owe its existence to Islam but predates the arrival of the religion to the sub-continent. This may be true in the practice of *karo kari*, or honor killings.

While Islamic patriarchy is used to justify its brutal practice, it is actually in blatant contradiction to Islamic injunctions.

According to a report recently published by *Shirkat Gah*—a Karachi-based women’s NGO—one woman is killed every day in the province of Sindh in the name of honor. In Punjab 240 women are killed every year. Worldwide, 25 percent of women who are killed in the name of honor were killed in Pakistan. These figures reflect only those cases that get reported.

I observed that when the victim is an upper-class, urban woman, the press coverage is sensational, whereas when a woman is killed in a remote rural village, the report will hardly receive a few lines in the paper. In the latter case, the media downplays the event so that it does not impact us.

As part of an investigation into honor killings, I accompanied a team of women from *Shirkat Gah* to several villages in Sindh. Although I was unable to complete my study and newsletter on this subject, I would like to share some of my findings.

The origins of honor killings in Pakistan can be traced to the pre-Islamic tribal culture of Balochistan and the Northwest Frontier Province. Migrating tribes from Bolochistan carried their tribal code into upper Sindh and southern Punjab, where the practice continues to this day.

Karo kari means blackness—thus the term is infused with a social stigma attached to the act of adultery. Death was, and still is today, the only way to erase this stigma. Mere suspicion, rumor or hearsay is sufficient to condemn a woman to death. There are no evidentiary requirements to establish guilt and, not surprisingly, the woman is never permitted to defend herself. In recent years, there has even been a case where a man dreamt in his sleep that his wife had been unfaithful to him and killed her upon awakening.

In a Sindhi village outside the city of Larkana, I met a young woman named Hawa who was labeled a *kari*—or black woman—by her paternal uncle. Her uncle fabricated a story insinuating that she had had illicit relations with his son-in-law. Hawa escaped death after the case was taken to the local *jirga*, or tribal council. Her father agreed to pay the uncle a large sum of money to settle a pre-existing financial dispute.

Hawa was one of the lucky ones since she and her mother were able to flee to a neighboring village after the settlement was paid. As in Hawa’s case, most accusations of adultery are fabricated—the latest statistics state that nearly 99 percent of *karo kari* cases are sheer fabrication.

I began to fully understand just how dehumanizing this practice is only after I traveled with a friend and local journalist to a *kari* graveyard. Prior to embarking on the trip, my friend told me that a few years before, some foreign journalists were doing a story on honor killings and had gone to the site. When the locals found out, they destroyed the film in their cameras and demanded that the journalists leave. Despite the risks involved, we hired a local guide to take the four of us to the off-limits site. Unlike the foreign journalists, we were all Pakistanis and were less likely to attract attention.

We drove for over an hour from Larkana through the Sindh countryside before we reached a small embankment. Our guide told us that we would have to park our car and walk the rest of the way. We walked for about 15 minutes in the scorching heat before reaching the desolate graveyard. There was no one in sight. I will never forget what I saw—hundreds of mounds ridden with thorns and overgrown bushes. These mounds, which had no stone markings, were the *kari* graves.

Our guide told us that this was the largest *kari* graveyard in the entire province of Sindh, perhaps even in Pakistan. He said that *karis* were not buried in a regular graveyard because of the stigma attached to their name. They were not given proper burial rites. And their family members were not allowed to mourn the death of their loved ones or to visit the site once the burial had taken place.

What slowly emerged from my study of *karo kari* is that men killed innocent women to settle old vendettas, to acquire land, to secure money to pay off pre-existing debts or to settle a land or property dispute. According to anthropological studies, the killing of women to restore male honor has been taking place for centuries in lands from China to throughout the Mediterranean. While most of the world has abolished the system, it continues to operate in Pakistan where the worth of a community is still vested in its land and notions of shame and honor are directly linked to these possessions. All this becomes possible because the

man who kills his woman as a *kari* is not a considered a murderer but the victim of dishonor.

The Pakistani penal code does not recognize a special defense for crimes of honor. In the rare instance where the case does make it to the courts, the defense of 'grave and sudden provocation' is used to acquit or deliver reduced sentences to men who claim honor as the reason they kill their women. A man who has been named a *karo* is generally spared and ends up paying the person whose so-called honor has been disgraced.

What does this mean for Pakistani women living in urban areas who may never have even heard of the practice? This is a difficult question to answer, one that I have still not been able to answer for myself. What I can say is that the practice of honor killings stems largely from entrenched patriarchal thinking combined with the selective adoption of Islamic laws and injunctions. In Pakistan, aspects of Muslim jurisprudence promoting the predominance of men—such as the *Zina* Ordinance—have been widely accepted while Islamic injunctions protecting the rights of women have been systematically rejected. Inversely, customs that contradict Islam but that ensure the supremacy of men have been accepted and continue to flourish.

One year after my fellowship I realize how difficult it is to describe the typical Pakistani woman—for the simple reason that she does not exist. It was a privilege to have heard so many personal stories from Pakistani women from all walks of life. Depending on where she lives, a Pakistani woman can find herself in a tribal, feudal or urban environment. She can be a highly qualified, self-confident professional, or a self-effacing peasant toiling alongside her men. She can be a central figure of authority in government or belong to a low-income ghetto.

Like that of her men, a woman's life in Pakistan is influenced by the social system, region and class to which she belongs. But whether a Pakistani woman belongs to the elite or the toiling masses, whether she lives in a remote Sindh village or in the dynamic environment of Karachi, she shares some things in common. Her life to some degree is influenced by an environment where honor crimes and laws such as the Hudood Ordinance continue to flourish.

The present government, which has only half-heartedly criticized the Hudood Ordinance, must find the courage to repeal the discriminatory law without fear of a backlash by religious extremists.



Leena (right) with her aunt, Farhat Husain

On the bright side, there is a growing willingness among women to discuss their problems and various forms of discrimination more openly. This may be the result of efforts of women's NGOs, which have mushroomed all over the country. While the activist spirit of the 80s has vanished, the level of consciousness has not.

Women are finding creative ways to express their experiences of gender, class and social discrimination. I got to know a number of contemporary women artists such as Nahid Raza, Salima Hashmi and Sheema Kirmani, who in many ways are challenging society to question the status and role of women. The face of media and journalism is also changing, as more and more women enter these fields. One of Pakistan's most widely read magazines, the *Herald*—was founded and managed by a group of women.

A friend asked me just before I left for the States whether, knowing what I now know, I would still have come to Pakistan to conduct my study. Without any hesitation, I responded yes. Despite the seemingly insurmountable problems Pakistan faces, what I have taken away with me was the people's innate goodness, their incredible generosity and warmth, their ability to make the best out life even under the most trying circumstances.

It is important to ensure that Pakistani women benefit from the rights granted to them through Islam over 1,400 years ago. In doing so, women will have to invoke the principles of *ijma* and *ijtihad*—respectively, con-

sensus or reasoning—to further their struggle. If a country such as Saudi Arabia could use these principles to ban slavery in 1960, then why can't Pakistan apply these principles for elevating the status of women? If the government can make a u-turn in its Afghanistan policy, then why can't it repeal laws that are discriminatory towards more than 50 percent of its population?

Pakistan is at a crossroads—the leaders can choose to throw off the shackles of conservative, regressive elements of society that have held women hostage for centuries. In order for the women's movement to make an impact, there remains a serious need to reexamine the legal system of Islam in the light of developments in today's context. My Pakistani women friends repeatedly said that Islam did not hold women back, but rather the narrow interpretation of the religion. Many are tired of the Islam-vs.-woman debate and resent the politicizing of the religion by successive governments.

Pakistan is struggling to emerge from its old and outdated traditions, while holding on to others. I don't think Pakistan must choose between tradition and modernization. It can celebrate the former without having to reject the latter. Coexistence between the traditional and the modern can be Pakistan's strength and its path to greatness. All change begins slowly. New ideas can grow into a sizeable minority and eventually change entrenched beliefs.

I will end with a quote by the founder of Pakistan—Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who was a strong advocate of change, who said in 1944:

“No nation can rise to the height of glory
unless your women are side by side with you.
We are the victims of evil customs.
It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut
within the four walls of their houses as prisoners.
You should take your women along with you
as comrades in every sphere of life.”

Finally, I would like to thank Peter Martin for his words of encouragement, support and guiding hand throughout my challenging year in Pakistan. Also a word of thanks to Brent Jacobson, Ellen Kozak, my advisors, trustees, and members of the Institute. Finally, thank you to my family for their patience and understanding the importance of my fellowship.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and Their Activities

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**

A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**

With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Andrew Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**

A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Museveni. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Ve/ve/et* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

Matthew Z. Wheeler (October 2002-2004) • **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

A former research assistant for the Rand Corporation specializing in South and Southeast Asia, Matt will spend two years looking into proposals, plans and realities of regional integration (and disintegration) along the Mekong River, from China to the sea at Vietnam. With a B.A. in liberal arts from Sarah Lawrence and an M.A. from Harvard in East Asian studies (as well as a year-long Blakemore Fellowship in Thai language studies) Matt will have to take long- and short-term conflicts in Burma, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia into account as he lives, writes and learns about the region.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **Southern Africa**

A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of freshwater supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his six years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

ICWA Letters (**ISSN 1083-4303**) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548

Fax: (603) 643-9599

E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net

Web Site: www.icwa.org

Executive Director: Peter Bird Martin
Program Assistant: Brent Jacobson
Publications Manager: Ellen Kozak

©2002 Institute of Current World Affairs, The Crane-Rogers Foundation.

The information contained in this publication may not be reproduced without the writer's permission.

Author: Khan, Leena Z.

Title: ICWA Letters - South Asia

ISSN:1083-4257

Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial

Language: English

Frequency: Monthly

Other Regions: East Asia; South

America; Europe/Russia; Mideast/

North Africa; Sub-Saharan Africa