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Leena Z. Khan is an Institute Fellow studying the intersection of culture, customs, law and women's lives in Pakistan.

A Time to Weave, A Time to Remember

By Leena Z. Khan

NOVEMBER, 2001

LANDHI, Pakistan—The first time I met Kausar she had just completed weaving 20 yards of *khaddar*, or hand-spun cotton fabric. With proud satisfaction, she showed me the bright blue-and-orange woven cloth. “It took me only one day to weave this,” she said, beaming. Kausar is among a handful of *khaddar* weavers still using the traditional *khaddi*, or handloom.¹

Kausar was born in Landhi, a dusty and bumpy 30-minute drive east of Karachi. Landhi, an industrial township founded shortly after Partition,² is inhabited primarily by low-income families. The township faces a number of festering problems, from substandard housing and sanitation, to poor health facilities, to constant power failures. Kausar has lived in Landhi her entire life. I had the pleasure of meeting with her on several occasions. She graciously shared her personal stories and experiences with me with courage, candor and humor.

Kausar belongs to the ‘Ansari’ indigenous group, a traditional community of weavers. *Khaddar*-weaving has been a part of her life for as long as she can remember. Kausar’s parents, originally from Agra, India, disassembled their *khaddis* prior to embarking on their train journey to Pakistan at Partition. In India, *khaddar* weaving had been the main source of income for the family. Like hundreds of other Ansaris, they settled in Landhi when they arrived in Pakistan and reassembled their *khaddis*. There, they continued their ancestral tradition of weaving. A cross-generational skill, *khaddar* weaving was literally learned ‘on the knees’ of the elder weavers. “Nearly every Ansari had a *khaddi* in their home,” Kausar told me in Urdu.³ “Young girls learned how to weave by



Street in front of Kausar's house in Landhi

¹ *Khaddar* weaving can be traced back to the days of the great Mughal emperor Akbar (1556-1605), who had a penchant for wearing the fabric. Kausar traces her roots to Agra, a north-India city with a rich tradition of *khaddar* weaving.

² The division of India and Pakistan into separate independent states by Britain in 1947.

³ Our conversation was entirely in Urdu. Kausar is fluent in spoken Urdu but is able only to read and write her name.

watching their mothers, grandmothers and aunts.”

While both of Kausar’s parents wove carpets and *khaddar*, she learned the skill from her father’s sister. Kausar reminisced with nostalgia: “I remember sitting on my aunt’s lap as a young child as she wove on the *khaddi*. I would count the days until she would let me weave on my own. She was very patient with me. She would often say ‘you are not ready yet, but I promise to let you weave when the time is right’. She finally let me weave at the age of nine. I made many mistakes and my weave was very loose at first. I was around twelve years old when I completed my first *thaan* [one *thaan*, or bundle of *khaddar*, consists of approximately 20 yards]. Most of the girls in my family were weaving by the age of ten. It was something that all young Ansari girls looked forward to doing. Weaving is in our blood.”

Kausar continued to weave *khaddar* after her marriage. She wove from *fajr* [sunrise] to *magrib* [sunset] and took breaks only for meals. “I usually wove 40 yards per day.” Simultaneously, Kausar supervised her small children, who sat on her lap as she wove. Through her weaving, Kausar contributed to the financial support of her family, yet did not exercise control over the fruits of her labor. Among Ansaris, the selling of the *khaddar* was an activity performed almost exclusively by the men. I asked Kausar how much she earned from the sales. “I have no idea,” she lamented. “In our community, the women

weavers rarely left their homes to sell the *khaddar* in the markets. My father-in-law and husband sold the *khaddar* I wove and kept the money. I was given spending money only to run the day-to-day activities of the house. I do not know exactly how much the *khaddar* sold for.”

Life for Kausar and other weavers has changed since the introduction of the power-loom in the mid ‘70s. Prior to the power-loom, handloom weavers were earning up to 2,000 to 5,000 rupees per month from sales in the open market, as compared with today, where they earn only 500 to 1500. Today, power-loom *khaddar* sells for 20 to 80 rupees per yard, depending on the quality, whereas handloomed *khaddar* starts at 100 rupees per yard. Power-loom *khaddar* is not only cheaper to produce, but is made in less than half the time as handloom *khaddar*. As a result the sales of hand-woven *khaddar* have dropped dramatically.

Unable to compete with power-loom *khaddar*, many of the weavers discontinued weaving. Many of the *khaddis* were once again disassembled and put away in storage while others were sold, Kausar said. “There is no longer an economic incentive to produce handloom *khaddar*. Times have changed. This is a dying tradition and the younger generation is not interested in weaving. They would rather work in garment factories where the daily wages are much higher. Without a financial incentive, the younger generation will not want to learn this craft.” Al-



though Kausar has taught both her girls, ages 20 and 16 how to use the handloom, neither expresses an interest in weaving.

“I would rather work in a factory,” her eldest daughter Shamaila told me. “There is very little money in weaving *khaddar*. I want to do something that will give me a big name.”

Kausar fears that handloom *khaddar* is on the decline due to the availability of cheaper power-loom *khaddar*, since most shopkeepers do not find handloom *khaddar* profitable anymore. They say that few people can differentiate between handloom and power-loom *khaddar* and would rather buy power-loom *khaddar* at a cheaper price. “There are a few who still appreciate handloom *khaddar* and specifically ask for it. Anyone who knows *khaddar* can differentiate between power-loom and handloom *khaddar*. There is something about handmade *khaddar* that power-loom *khaddar* lacks. It’s in the texture and the way it feels when you wear it. A machine-made fabric can never compete with something that is handmade.”

Kausar describes herself, her family and her community as *ghareeb* (poor). Today both she and her husband work to support the family. Her husband is a mechanic and also makes *chatois* (mats made of straw and plastic). He sells the *khaddar* she weaves in various cloth markets in Landhi and Karachi. While he does not directly give her the money earned from the sales of *khaddar*, her husband provides her with around 2,000 rupees per month (approximately 30 US dollars) to run the house. “I do not ask him anymore how much the *khaddar* is selling for. I know from other weavers that the *khaddar* does not sell as well as it did prior to the introduction of the power-loom,” she says. “We may be very poor, but this is what God has given us. We are making do with what little we have. I am fortunate that I have good children and an obedient son,” she says with an air of contentment. “My son has seen the way I have been treated by my father-in-law and husband. He gives me all the money he earns, about 500 rupees every month. ‘Mother, this is for you,’ he tells me.” Tears well up in Kausar’s eyes, which she quickly wipes away and with a smile adds, “I can’t ask for more. I am very happy.”

Since the introduction of the power-loom, Kausar has been supplementing her family’s income by performing small jobs such as sewing women’s clothes and cooking *samosas* (deep fried pastry filled with potatoes, spices and meat) for weddings and other occasions. Kausar says she works so that all of her children can receive an education. Today, she makes all of the family’s decisions from buying food to sending her children to school. She has three children still in school, ages seven, nine and fourteen. “The biggest problem for women in our community is lack of education. With an education, a woman can do anything. Look at me, I can barely read or write because I never went to school. Things will be different

for my children. My youngest daughter [age nine] is the smartest out of all my children. I will educate her at least until she completes her metric [grade ten]. I want her to go far in life.”

She is also setting *jehaze* (dowry) money aside for her daughters. “My husband should be more concerned about his daughters’ futures, but he does not care. I am the only one saving for my daughters’ weddings. In our society, giving a girl a proper *jehaze* at her wedding is very important. Every family starts to save as soon as the girl is born. Everyone asks ‘How much did you give your daughter in her *jehaze*? I don’t want anyone telling me that I didn’t give my daughters enough. I have no choice, since I have to live in this community.”

Arranged marriages are indeed still the norm in Pakistan, regardless of socio-economic status. While it is becoming common for young men and women from affluent backgrounds to have more of a say in the matter, and even choose their own partners, most meetings for couples are circumscribed and generally take place under close family supervision. Kausar, far from being affluent, had no say in her own wedding. “Things will be different for my daughters,” she says with surety. “I will not force them to marry someone they do not like.” Kausar, as do many parents in Pakistan, views the marriage of their daughters as a source of worry. The cost of weddings can range from 50,000 rupees (about 800 U.S. dollars) to several *lakhs* (one lakh is approximately 1,500 U.S. dollars). She has saved very little for the wedding of her daughter Shamaila, who is engaged to marry her first cousin. Kausar explained that among Ansaris, the entire community contributes to a family’s wedding expenses, so that no one family goes into debt. “I have financially helped other families in their daughters’ weddings, and I know people will help me also.”

I asked how old she was when she married. She began to laugh. “I don’t know for sure. Around sixteen or seventeen. It doesn’t matter. I remember nothing about my wedding, except that the day after, when my husband brought me home to see my parents, I ran to my father and burst into tears.”

Kausar became emotional as she told me about the most difficult years in her life. Her father-in-law lived with her and husband until his death a few years ago. “My life revolved around him,” she said. “I was his personal slave from sunrise to sunset.” Kausar remembers cooking breakfast for him every morning, making sure his clothes were pressed, having lunch and dinner ready when he and her husband returned from work. “My father-in-law never spoke to me or acknowledged that I was alive until he needed something. He was always angry with me. One day my mother and I went to pray at a *mazar* [shrine for a saint] for a few hours. My sister was in the house and left the iron on, which ended up burning the rug. My father-in-law blamed me because I had left the house. I would never respond to him when he

yelled, which made him even more angry.

“My father-in-law was so dominant that even my husband was afraid of him,” she continued. “He would do whatever he told him to — when to eat, when to sleep. My father-in-law even convinced my husband to divorce me!” Kausar told me of the painful events surrounding her divorce, her second marriage and her subsequent remarriage to her first husband. Kausar was pregnant with her fourth child when her first husband divorced her. She subsequently moved into her father’s house where she lived for the next seven years. “My husband, with my father-in-law’s permission, wanted to reconcile. I had no strong feelings either way.” Kausar manages to find humor in the even the most trying of circumstances. “My life has been very difficult. See how dark I am today? I used to be called ‘Punjaban’⁴ as a girl because I used to be so fair. I became dark after my marriage!”

Before reconciling with her first-husband, Kausar had to observe a *hilala*, or intervening marriage. Under Islamic Law, codified in the Muslim Family Law Ordinance-1961, it is incumbent upon a woman to have an intervening marriage before remarrying the previous spouse. Kausar explained that a marriage was quickly arranged with her husband’s brother. The very next day, they obtained a divorce. Kausar remarried her first husband after observing the *iddat*. *Iddat* is a period of four months and ten days following the dissolution of marriage for any reason, during which it is incumbent upon a woman not to contract another marriage. I asked Kausar whether she agreed with the practice of *hilala* or was given a choice in the matter. She thought for a moment and replied, “*hilala* is good for the woman in one sense because it forces the man to think twice before divorcing his wife. If he wants to reconcile with her in the future, she will have to become someone else’s wife first. This is not easy for men to accept, so it probably is a good thing.” I asked her how she felt about having to marry her brother-in-law (who was already married) and consummate the marriage before being able to remarry her husband. “It was naturally very painful. To this day I cannot bear the thought of going to his house or looking at him in the face. I have not spoken to him since the day of the divorce.”

The only change after moving back to her husband’s house, said Kausar, was that her father-in-law had suffered a stroke and was less controlling than before. “It was only after his stroke that his attitude changed towards me. He began to acknowledge

from time to time how much I had done for him over the years. I continued to take care of him throughout his illness. None of my sisters-in-law lifted a finger for him. Although he did not treat me well, he chose to live with me and my husband because he knew that only I would take care of him. May God grant his soul peace. I cried a lot when he died. But I do not miss him.”

* * * * *

Kausar was eager to take me to Babar Market, where her 18-year-old son Dahnish works on *silai* (embroidery) under the tutelage of a master tailor. Landhi’s oldest market, Babar Market is famous for the number of specialist workers embroidering *silai* on women’s clothes. The largest number of tailors and garment factories in Sindh are found in Landhi. Compared to Karachi, the township produces clothing at significantly lower prices. The electricity went out a few short minutes after Kausar and I entered the market. Kausar must have sensed my initial panic. She took my hand and laughed as we stood in darkness, “Don’t worry, this happens all the time. The generators will come on soon.” Before she could finish her sentence, I could hear the generators being started, one after the other. Although loud and distracting, the generators lit up Babar Market up in a few seconds. We continued to wind our way to the shop where her son worked.

We made our way through hundreds of crowded stalls inside the labyrinthine covered bazaar. Vendors sold everything from fresh meats, fish, nuts and dried fruits to colorful glass bangles. When Kausar and I arrived at



A Bangle seller's display of a variety of colorful glass adornments for women. Babar Market becomes a paradise for women during the month of Ramazan and the days leading up to the Muslim festival of Eid.

⁴ A Punjaban, or woman from the Punjab province, is considered beautiful because of her fair complexion.



Kausar's son embroiders silai on a woman's khameez. Kausar cannot afford to send him to school since it would cost approximately 3,500 rupees to enroll him into a private school with a monthly tuition of 800 per month. The wages from Dahnish's labor are an important rupees source of income for the family.

the shop where Dahnish worked, we found him engrossed in embroidering silai on a woman's *khameez* (shirt). He looked up with a shy smile and went back to work. I marveled at his ability to work in cramped working conditions with poor lighting, and yet still produce such fine workmanship. Like many parents in Pakistan, Kausar cannot afford to send Dahnish to school. He stopped attending school at the age of 13 and began to learn embroidery under a silai master. The 500 rupees (approximately 8 US dollars) per month he earns helps with the household expenses.

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I saw Kausar again on *koonday*, an auspicious day in the Muslim calendar. *Koonday* is observed in remembrance of Imam Jafar Sadiq, an important spiritual leader for Muslims as well as the great-grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. On *koonday*, specially prepared food is served in earthen clay pots. Traditionally, Muslims observe *koonday* by reciting a *nazar-niaz* (prayer from the Qur'an) over *puris* (fried bread), *kheer* (rice pudding) and *tikyaan* (biscuits made of flour, ghee and sugar). Kausar has kept this tradition alive and has taught her daughters how to prepare these dishes. We sat on a *charpai* (a four-legged elevated platform made of jute and cloth used for both sitting and sleeping) and feasted on pudding, fried *puris* and cardamom tea. Kausar related the story

of *koonday* to me. Legend has it that there once lived a poor woodcutter who, despite his hard efforts, could not make ends meet in order to support his family. He decided to go to another town where he hoped to find sustainable work. One day as he was chopping wood, his axe fell on a hard object. Upon further inspection, the woodcutter discovered that he had struck a treasure chest full of money and jewels. The same night the woodcutter's wife had a dream where Imam Jafar Sadiq appeared to her and told her to recite a *nazar-niaz* over certain foods — namely, bread — and to feed the poor afterwards. In the dream he told her that her husband would return soon. The dream proved to be true. Her husband returned within a few days, now a wealthy man. "If my prayers come true," said Kausar, "I will cook a pot of *biryani* [rice dish with lamb or chicken] and distribute it to the poor."

After our small feast, Kausar led me into the *anghaan* (a small, open courtyard at the center of the home) where her *khaddi* stood in a corner. With a tall wooden frame and foot pedals, the *khaddi* had the look of a bygone era. "This belonged to my mother," she said as she sat down comfortably to demonstrate how it worked. Kausar carefully placed the *bobil* (spool of thread) inside the *sital* (a wooden holder). The *thaani* (richly dyed parallel threads) were stretched taut on its frame, providing a screen to the weaver. The *khaddi* came alive as Kausar began to



(Left) Kausar sitting at the charka (spinning wheel). This is first stage in the weaving process as bundles of thread are wrapped onto spools later used in the weaving process. (Above) Spools of thread used to form the thaani

(Below) Preparing to weave, Kausar places the bobil into the sital. (Right) Kausar weaving



weave. I became mesmerized by the hypnotic rhythm of the handloom as cloth began to appear before me. Using both legs and arms, weaving *khaddar* proves to be a workout. The right hand continuously pulls a handle back and forth which controls the amount of thread released, while the left hand pulls a part of the wooden frame forward to ensure that the weave stays tight. Meanwhile, both legs are also at work as they move up and down on the wooden pedals. Both feet push down, with force, on the pedals that control the frame, as the *bobil* is woven into the *thaani*. Kausar wove barefoot. She said that it's easier to handle the *khaddi* without shoes on.

Kausar seemed to fuse with the *khaddi* as she became engrossed in her weaving. She was truly in her element at the *khaddi* as I witnessed her love for weaving transformed into beautiful yards of cloth.

* * * * *

Shahida is Kausar's neighbor. She also belongs to the Ansari community and traces her roots back to Agra. Shahida is in her mid-forties and has six children. She, along with her five sisters and three brothers, learned to weave *khaddar* at a young age. Although Shahida still weaves today, she told me that weavers in Landhi have encountered tough times since they've stopped receiving an adequate return for their hard efforts. "Before the power-loom, weavers made enough to support their families. But today most weavers have to find other work to supplement their income. The extra money I earn helps in buying clothes for the children and for their education." Shahida weaves and her husband sells the finished product in the open market.

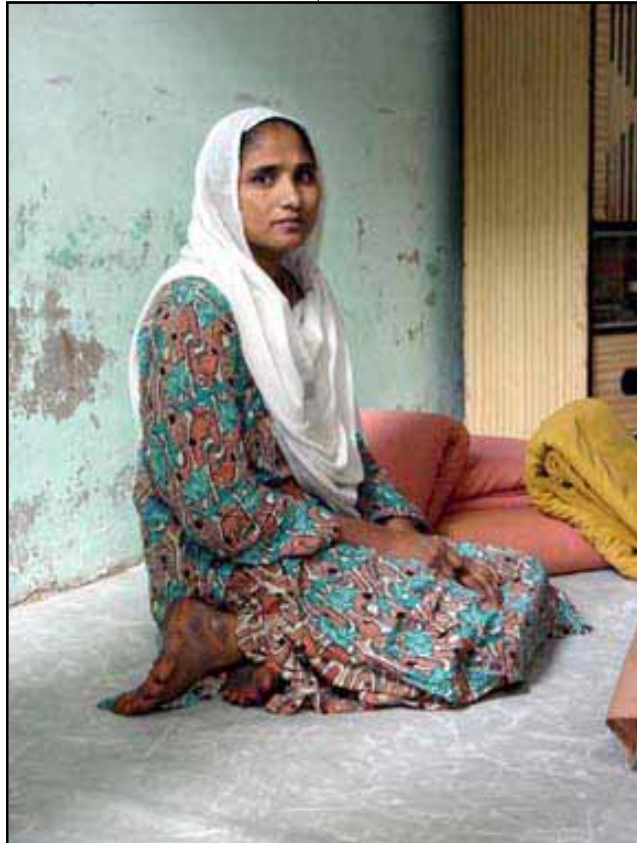
She says she is fortunate to have a husband who gives her the money from the sales. "My husband and I had a love marriage⁵. I have more freedom than most women. He doesn't hide the money from me. I don't have to ask for money from him all the time. I know how much we have to spend at any given time."

Once a thriving activity involving the entire family, *khaddar* weaving is now a dying tradition. With little financial incentive left, Kausar and Shahida do not see much of a future for *khaddar* weavers. Shahida does not want her children to become weavers. "Weaving *khaddar* is physically laborious. There is too much hard work involved and not enough money. This was a way of life for my parents, but today there are so many hardships that we no longer can rely on weaving to sustain us. I want to work in a factory, where I could earn twice as much, but my husband will not let me work outside of the home. I have no other choice but to weave. I have convinced him to let our daughters work in a factory. Today, more and more women are working in factories, so it is not considered such a bad thing. A

few years ago our neighbors would talk if they saw a woman leaving the home to work. They would even say, 'Look, that woman's husband makes her work.' That is no longer the case. It is very common to see women working in factories. In fact, it is necessary."

Kausar misses the sense of community she grew up in before the arrival of the power-loom. Weaving *khaddar*, she told me, had a therapeutic value for women as well. Weaving provided a space for women in her community to come together for a few hours each day to laugh and to share each other's problems. "My mother, aunts and women in the community, we were always chatting away as they wove at their *khaddis*. Everyone's secrets came out at the *khaddi*! As they wove, they listened to each other and shared in each other's problems. They all gave each other support even if all problems could not be solved."

Shahida, refers to Kausar not by her name but as "*achee*," or "the good one". It is easy to understand why she does. "I'll share a secret with you about Kausar. She will never tell you, but she gives money to anyone in need. She has the biggest heart of anyone I know." A few years ago, Kausar took one of her neighbors who wanted to obtain a divorce from her abusive husband to a legal-aid center in Karachi. While her neighbor did not go through with the divorce, Kausar helped her to ascertain her rights and options. "My husband tells me to stay out of other's affairs," Kausar remarks. "But when



Shahida and bundles of woven *khaddar*

someone comes to me for help I feel that it is my duty to help them. I can never say no to anyone in distress."

This sense of giving and providing a guiding hand probably has roots in Kausar's strong ties to her Ansaris community, where helping others was a defining characteristic. While the days of handloom *khaddar* weaving may be on the decline, the spirit of the *khaddi* lives on in Kausar and other weavers as they struggle to redefine their livelihoods, their dreams and futures for their children. □

⁵ A 'love marriage,' in contrast to an arranged marriage, means a marriage of one's choice.

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and their Activities

Shelly Renae Browning (March 2001- 2003) • **AUSTRALIA**

A surgeon specializing in ears and hearing, Dr. Browning is studying the approaches of traditional healers among the Aborigines of Australia to hearing loss and ear problems. She won her B.S. in Chemistry at the University of the South, studied physician/patient relationships in China and Australia on a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship and won her M.D. at Emory University in Atlanta. Before her ICWA fellowship, she was a Fellow in Skull-Base Surgery in Montreal at McGill University's Department of Otolaryngology.

Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**

A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

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 doctoral candidate 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.

Gregory Feifer (January 2000 - 2002) • **RUSSIA**

With fluent Russian and a Master's from Harvard, Gregory worked in Moscow as political editor for *Agence France-Presse* and the weekly *Russia Journal* in 1998-9. He sees Russia's latest failures at economic and political reform as a continuation of failed attempts at Westernization that began with Peter the Great — failures that a long succession of behind-the-scenes elites have used to run Russia behind a mythic facade of "strong rulers" for centuries. He plans to assess the continuation of these cultural underpinnings of Russian governance in the wake of the Gorbachev/Yeltsin succession.

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-American agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**

Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

Leena Khan (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**

A U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

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