

‘Karo Kari’: The term may implicate men, but the practice is cruelty against women

Interview with Akmal Wasim

Akmal Wasim is a professor at the Hamdard School of Law, Karachi. This is an excerpt from a lengthy interview conducted with him in February 2013. It was transcribed and edited by Liliana Corrieri.

‘Karo Kari’ is a Sindhi term used for honor killing, specific for the province of Sindh. Karo means black man, and Kari means black woman; the term means they have blackened themselves by committing this sin, dishonoring the family. Another term used in southern Punjab is ‘Siyah Kari’; a different name, but the norm is the same.

The issue of honour is not limited to karo kari and it is not only related to Islam. It goes way back in time and space. In India, one manifestation of a man’s honour was his wife. There used to be a custom in the Hindu society, “sati” which was a sort of misinterpretation or reinterpretation of the Hindu scriptures. According to the custom of sati, when a man died his widow had to go with him. This custom was prevalent when the British East-India company entered India, at the time Sir Charles James Napier was sent from England. He was the one who came out with a ban forbidding sati and providing punishment for it in the name of security of life. It represented an evolution of the rule of law based on legal order. Nevertheless, the custom continued and it was very hard to eradicate it from the subcontinent.

A reformist ruler in Bengal, [Raja Rammohan Roy](#), came up with another interpretation of the same text. The woman could decide not to undertake sati, although she would remain the honor of her husband even after his death. She would be wearing white clothes for the rest of her life so that people could know she was a widow and therefore she could not remarry. Little by little, sati was totally eradicated from India. Sir Charles James Napier was then sent to Sindh province. Before this moment, the practice of Karo Kari is not found in Sindh.

There is a famous poetic compendium by Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (1689 – 1752), called *Shah Jo Risalo*, which narrates of seven heroines, seven Queens of Sindh and the tragic romances they go through. Despite the troubles recounted, none of the stories ever mentions karo kari. The nature of Sindh people is very mellow, mild, not inclined to violence. We don’t find violence to such an extent that brings about the death of the woman. There are actually two areas in the subcontinent known for their mellowness, peace and harmonious aspirations: one is Sindh and the other one is Kashmir, and both became victim to politics. In both areas, violence was brought in. Politics has played a major role in the spreading of karo kari in Pakistan, as a powerful instrument to control the people.

Violence began with tribal conflicts involving Baloch tribes. Balochistan is known for its fierce and nationalistic attitude. Balochistan being a region with scarce water, Baloch tribes pushed into Sindh territory, which is richer of water and more suitable for cultivation. They brought with them their traditions and customs. In Sindh, honor was not related to women, but to the wealth of a man, the land he possessed, his properties and his social status. As soon as tribes from Balochistan moved in, a cultural change occurred within the Sindh region, and the custom of karo kari started to take place.

When Sir Charles James Napier arrived in 1848, he came out with the same sort of ban he had imposed in India against sati, but with some changes against the custom of karo kari. Between 1848-1852 there was an intense attempt to control the incidence of karo kari in the region, but it was very difficult. He even held consultations with the Jirgas [tribal council of elders], threatening to burn down their villages and cultivations if killings in the name of honour continued to occur. At that point communities made sure that the custom no longer took place in the usual evident way. Instead, the number of women committing suicide increased, and it was either because they were forced by the circumstances or more frequently it was the case of honor killings made to look like suicides. Sir Charles J. Napier went with a last try: he threatened to send the perpetrators to Karachi, which was a perceived as a big sacrifice as these communities were really attached to their lands and properties. But even then, killings simply continued to occur.

A karo kari can happen independently, but often involves the judgment of the Jirga, being the only judiciary and administrative forum available in rural areas especially. The decision in these cases is usually to kill the woman, or giving away girls from the perpetrator's family or from the victim's family, depending on the case, as a settlement between the parts. So in this case we have other women "wiping out" the alleged sin committed. This practice is called 'vani' and became quite common in Punjab. It is a clear example of the way women are considered sexual property. Once a tort occurs, the other man's property is up for barter.

All these customs come from a very shameful mindset. Since Pakistan has come to be in 1947, the State has cooperated and agreed with the tribal elders. General Zia-ul-Haq's evil conduct penetrated all spheres of life in the country. It was a general degeneration. When he came to power, the idea of governance was to control people through religion, as religion was an area where he could find unity within the population. In order to rule, he had to cooperate with the tribes. And at this point the problem of karo kari becomes a serious human rights issue.

While karo kari is about gender violence, there are also other issues. It is important to remember the original meaning of the expression karo kari, which implies both a man and a woman. When you declare a man "karo", you also declare a woman "kari". Pakistani society lives in a state of denial however. There is a diffuse refusal of introspection. This refusal goes from the society to

the state and from the state back to the society. There are many issues that do get even touched or discussed, and it will be difficult to overcome those taboos without a proper emancipation, coming out, rising awareness and discussion of reality.