



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Acceptance Speech

Shahnaz Bukhari

2003

Thank you, Ambassador Kirkpatrick.

Mr. Train, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen ...

I am honored to be present here as the recipient of the Civil Courage Prize for 2003. In a world where there are so many people doing extraordinary things to bring change for the better, I feel overwhelmed and privileged to be singled out.

I founded the Progressive Women's Association in 1986. Appalling abuse in society and at home was a family or personal issue, not perceived as a criminal act, by perpetrators, by victims or by the legal system. Since 1987, the Progressive Women's Association has dealt with more than 15,000 cases of violence against women. Physical assault, psychological harassment, being thrown out of one's own house by one's husband, in-laws or one's own family. Physical abuse or extreme violence, such as breaking or cutting of limbs, chopping off of the nose, rape or gang rape, being killed in the name of "honor," and being bartered in exchange for land, murder or cattle. These are common happenings, faced by over 75% of the women in our country.

My family and I have been the target of a series of threats and acts of terror aimed at breaking my resolve. My residence and the women's shelter home created by PWA were raided by police many times. After one such raid I decided to take my children out of harm's way and send them to a safe haven. So now I live alone, in a very hostile environment.

In Pakistan, each region has its own forms of violence against women: karo kari in Sindh, "honor killing" in Punjab, sia kari in Baluchistan, sawara and selling of women in the North, acid burning in Multan. Bride burnings in Punjab, derived from hindu suttee.

For some of us there is a pivotal moment in life when our path becomes clearer. For me it happened in 1994. While visiting a hospital to see a woman named Zainab Noor who had been horrendously tortured by her husband, I realized that violent crimes against women were of phenomenal proportions, and the most under-reported of crimes.

Her own husband, a maulvi or religious leader mutilated Zainab. He inserted iron rods in her genitalia and passed live electric current through her, leaving her handicapped and scarred for life. We highlighted her cause in the media, and she was sent to the UK for reconstructive surgery by the former Prime Minister, Benazir Bhutto. Today she is an invalid; she has two colostomy bags attached to her belly, which she must carry with her until she dies. As for him, he was punished for 30 years, but was released after six years, and now is a free man. PWA is still pursuing her case in our Supreme Court.

Starting in March 1994, "honor killing" and burn victims became my main concerns. In the past nine years, PWA has collected data on 6,550 victims of fire and acid alone. This is not a national statistic, but merely the data collected for only three hospitals of Islamabad and Rawalpindi, the twin cities where I live. The survival rate stands at only 0.02%.

We have pursued and investigated about 500 cases after visiting the sites of incidents, recording the dying declarations of victims, assembling circumstantial evidence, collecting information from the neighborhood, and getting post mortems after exhumation. There was no support whatsoever from the state in these matters. PWA not only helps victims and their families socially, but also medically and legally. As a pressure tactic, we do media trials of the criminals, police and the concerned government departments to bring forth the truth.

PWA is the only organization to follow up such cases in police stations, hospitals or with the administration. It was due to our sustained struggle that violence against women in all its forms is discussed in the national and inter-national forums. National Geographic made a documentary film called "Honor Killings in Pakistan," and the BBC made one called "Murder behind Purdah" Both documentaries are based on my work.

Our current President, General Musharraf, is a progressive man, but we have seen no sustainable change since his government came in to power. In the last four months alone, PWA activated 18 cases of inhumane violence, and yet not a single woman out of 30% female representatives in the National Assemblies raised her voice.

There is no specific religious reason why this horrific violence occurs in my country. An outsider might say, "this is religion," but that would be wrong. There is nothing in the Quran that condones violence against women. Islam is a gentle religion; in the past, it abolished repressive and cruel practices committed against females, such as barter of women and female infanticide. To blame religion for this violence is a great disservice to Islam.

The blame lies with the religious and political elements that are exploiting people for their personal gain. The misinterpretation of Islam and then the propagation of that school of thought have contributed to making more and more extremists, and fanatics.

Before I end, I would like to point out some crucial facts about violence against women, which is carried out with complete impunity for the criminals. The conviction rate for such felons is barely 4%. While the victim lies on her deathbed, burnt to ashes in the name of honor, the offender conveniently steps out of the case because of the loopholes in our system.

So changes in our legal system must follow, for gender justice.

Most of these women are so poor that they could probably never afford the services of a lawyer.

The attitude of our police, our so-called "protectors," is pitiful. Besides their lack of gender sensitivity, they fail in their duty of accurately documenting the basics of a case, of including medical reports, of recording evidence. For all this, the police openly demand bribes.

With an unimaginably high rate of burn incidents in Pakistan, we do not have a single burn center. Unhygienic, non-air-conditioned, filthy, ill-equipped rooms are called burn wards.

Despite campaigning for change, screaming ourselves hoarse, we wait for someone to take notice. Each night that I have stayed up crying for the fate of a little girl that will never have a tomorrow, each day that I have spent walking through courthouses seeking justice for women that have been wronged, my resolve has only been strengthened.

Our most dire needs are sustained awareness campaigns at the national level. Our need is for burn centers to be developed country-wide, so that every time a woman falls prey to the barbarians of our society, she has a place to turn to. Finally, and most importantly, there is need for change in our legislature, so that every time a man attempts to hurt or harm a woman, he would first think of the consequences of his actions.

This award, The Civil Courage Prize, has given me a unique opportunity to bring my cause to the attention of the world. In the next few days, I will travel to Washington, D.C, Minneapolis, and Boston to generate awareness and seek support of my efforts to end inhumane violence against women in my country. We need help and cooperation. We need the support of the international community, of governments, of business corporations and individuals like you.

It is at times like tonight that I feel we are not alone. To know that we have friends, who feel passionately for the cause that we have spent our lives working for, is truly a feeling I find hard to express in words. Here are a few slides to show you my cause, the reason for my passion.

Mr. Train, ladies and gentlemen, I once again thank you for this prestigious award, and the fact that you all came tonight and took the time to listen.