

Attacked Nuns Want Justice for Pakistani Women

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Staff Writer

(March 27, 2008) A Pakistani nun barely survived a slashed throat during a knife attack in her convent near Lahore. The attack, which occurred on International Women's Day, drove home the terrifying reality of the plight of women in that country.

On the afternoon of March 8, Sister Nuzrat Shafi, 34, was alone in her convent in Youhanabad, which is the largest Christian settlement in Pakistan, about 270 kilometers southeast of Islamabad.

"I was alone in the convent due to fever and a stomach disorder," Sister Safi told *UCA News* while speaking through a breathing tube.

"We live together in a group of five nuns, but two were in Mariamabad for the annual tradition of visiting the national shrine and the other two were at the nearby major seminary attending a prayer service."

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon when she heard a knock on the door. Suddenly, two young men, about 25 years old, burst into the room.

"First they asked for money and then for keys to the cupboards of other nuns," Sister Shafi said.

"When I told them I was the youngest and had no idea where money is kept, they became furious, wrecked my cupboard and then slapped me. I cried for them not to touch me but was thrown on the bed. After that I do not know what happened."

The last thing she remembered before passing out was hearing her attackers say, "Finish her."

According to Sister Genevieve Ram Lal, provincial of the Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary, the attack was the first of its kind within the congregation and left Sister Shafi with badly damaged vocal chords.

Sister Lal said that the incident, which occurred on International Women's Day, broadened her understanding of the situation of women in the country. "We need justice," she said.

In a disturbing irony, the day on which Sister Shafi was attacked was designed to draw attention to the serious violence endured by Pakistani women on a daily basis in that country.

According to the Madadgar Research and Database Center, in 2007 there were 7,870 cases of sexual violence against women with homicide, suicide, and the application of the "hudood ordinances" (which allows women who are victims of sexual violence to be accused of extramarital sex and arrested).

Firdous Chaudhry, coordinator of the Pakistan Catholic Women's Organisation (PCWO), told *Asia News* that Christian women have it even worse.

“Christian women face threefold discrimination,” he explained. “They belong to a religious minority, they live in an underdeveloped society, and they are women.”

For this reason, the PCWO works to make women more aware of their rights and to provide legal and social assistance to the victims of violence.

Jasmine Joseph, secretary of Caritas in Faisalabad, told *Asia News* that the women who are most at risk in Pakistan are housemaids and other working women. “In addition to receiving low pay, they are often subject to sexual abuse, which they must often tolerate in order not to lose their job, while they lack any effective legal protection.”

Shazia Naz, a Christian lawyer, confirmed that “women are still discriminated against at work, and are killed in the name of so-called honor.”

She says that the amendments to the hudood laws have only been “cosmetic,” and even the 2006 law for the protection of women has brought no actual improvements. In the legal tribunals, the testimony of a woman is still considered only half as valuable as that of a man.

But the women of Pakistan are strong and determined, much like Sister Shafi and her fellow sisters who have no intention of leaving the area despite the recent attack.

“The assailants almost killed Shafi,” Sister Lal said, “but God can do wonders.”

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