



Regional Seminar

Independent Functioning of Press/Media Councils

Media and Human Rights

Ishtiaq Ahmad

Organized by Eastern Mediterranean University, in collaboration with World Association of Press Councils, Gazimagusa, North Cyprus

Introduction

News reporting is perhaps the most challenging job for a journalist. It requires objectivity, courage and conviction. The value of these essential elements of news reporting becomes all the more crucial when one is reporting human rights issues. For unlike other areas of news reporting, human rights reporting requires extra zeal and commitment from a reporter, especially in cases involving gross violation of the rights of woman and children.

Since human rights reporters are a direct participant in particular situations involving violation of human rights, and work with reality itself, their work is not only more credible but can really make a difference as far as the protection of human rights by state authorities voluntarily or under the pressure of external powers, including international organizations, is concerned. In the longer run, through their reporting and opinion writing, journalists can create a public opinion which is conducive for social change required to get rid of traditional values hampering the full realization of human rights in a conservative society.

These are some of the key lessons I have learned from my own experience of human rights reporting in a leading Pakistan English newspaper, *The Nation*. Since the late 1970s, the Pakistani society has been plagued by the phenomenon of Islamic extremism. The bigoted or perverted way in which Islam has been interpreted, and implemented, during this period has had horrific social consequences. In a socially conservative, economically weak, politically backward country, we should naturally expect women and children to be on the receiving end. But Pakistan's track-record in securing the rights of women and children is not just miserable but shameless.

It was during 1994 that I published extensively in *The Nation* on the human rights situation in Pakistan in the form of both news reporting and opinion writing. I was then a Staff Reporter of the newspaper in Islamabad, and two horrific cases of woman rights violation and one case involving child rights violation that I reported during the year are worth mentioning.

Did I succeed in bringing relief to the victim and punishment to the culprit? Or, is it a reporter's duty to do so? Do public opinion and media campaign on human rights make a difference in a country whose ruling elites, purely out of political considerations, show a total lack of concern and conviction on the question of human rights? Are there some lessons to be learned from human rights reporting in countries like Pakistan where the forces of religious bigotry enjoy considerable influence in a vastly poor, ignorant and militaristic state and society? The following narration of the three touching tales may help answer these questions.

Zainab Noor

The first case involved a woman named Zainab Noor, the wife of an Imam of a mosque in a village situated near Islamabad. Zainab's lower abdominal parts, including uterus, were burnt by her husband, Qari Muhammad Sharif, as he forcibly electrified her sensitive parts. She was brought to a city hospital for surgery by Qari Sharif, who lied to the medical doctors that Zainab had accidentally fallen on a burning oil stove, thereby burning her hips. When the surgeons found out his claim to be untrue, Qari Sharif ran away, leaving his dying wife

behind in the hospital. For some days, the gory affair went unnoticed, as numerous such cases go unnoticed in Pakistan where violations of human rights are so rampant that both media and public tend to show an indifferent attitude. It was at this stage that I entered the scene, breaking the scary story on Zainab in *The Nation*, 9 March 1994, which was titled “Only a Lunatic Could Do This!”

Some excerpts from the report: “Zainab, a young woman of 24, is waiting to die because of maltreatment by her husband. In Surgical Ward No 9 of the Rawalpindi General Hospital, she lies waiting for her moment to arrive...She has been a victim of the sadistic excesses of her husband...Lying in the hospital, Zainab counts her days surviving a heavy doze of high potency antibiotics. However, her fever goes up hour by hour. Doctors are not hopeful of her survival...Zainab is breathing her last, telling the world how helpless a woman can be in a male-dominated society such as Pakistan’s. None of the organizations working for women’s rights or human rights in the twin cities has so far expressed any concern about this incident, nor was anything said about it during a number of walks, talks, seminars and processions that were held Tuesday (8 March) to observe the International Women’s Day.”

It was just a coincidence that my story on Zainab appeared a day after the International Women’s Day was observed with much fanfare, with the then government of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto making conventional official claims on its commitment to women rights. The report sent shock waves across Pakistan and its impact was felt outside the country’s frontiers. The BBC broadcast the issue the day it appeared in *The Nation*, and some foreign newspapers continued to quote it in the following days. For my part, I did not stop writing on the matter due to my personal desire that victim Zainab’s life should be saved and relieved, and culprit Qari Sharif should get the due legal punishment. Every day, I either published a news report or wrote an opinion column highlighting the plight of Zainab, the crime of Qari Sharif and the insensitivity of the government and the general public on the tragic incident.

Consequently, within days, public opinion was sufficiently mobilized, as most national newspapers and non-governmental human rights organizations also started following the case closely. “Zainab Unmasks Torture by Her Husband”, Zainab Waits for Justice,” “Miles to Go Before She Sleeps” were the titles of some of my newspaper reports published successively until Prime Minister Bhutto personally intervened and sent Zainab to London for reconstructive surgery on the state expense. On 12 June 1994, Zainab returned home after a successful reconstructive surgery in London. However, a colostomy bag was permanently attached to her lower abdomen.

As soon as I was sure that the victim was getting the due medical relief, the focus of my reports shifted to the judicial process which started as soon as culprit Qari Sharif was arrested by the police within days after the publication of my breaking story on Zainab. Even though it is not possible to comment on a judicial case when it is being heard, the nature of the crime Qari Sharif committed was so grave, and public disgust at it so intense, that one could write at length about the factors behind Qari Sharif’s sadistic streaks. In an interview with me (*The Nation*, 28 March, 1994), Qari Sharif sought forgiveness from the Rawalpindi Branch of the Speedy Trials Court, where his case was being heard, while arguing that he committed the barbaric act in a moment of fury, and that he was ashamed of it. At the same time, however, he accused Zainab of engaging in illicit activities, an allegation that is usually made in a male chauvinistic society such as Pakistan’s. Qari Sharif’s trial received an exceptionally large coverage in both local and foreign press. Justice finally prevailed, and, on 14 July 1994, he was given 30 years rigorous imprisonment plus fine.

While Qari Sharif remains locked up in Rawalpindi's Adiala Jail, Zainab and her 10 years old son live in a nursing hostel in Islamabad. Although successive governments' efforts to provide relief to Zainab have been less than satisfactory, still they are enough, given the fact that there are thousands of other cases of poor women victims which remain devoid of any kind of government relief.

Children in Chains

The second human rights case which I reported in *The Nation*, again in 1994, concerned the plight of dozens of children who were chained by another Imam of a *madrassah* (seminary) in a town located in the Seraiki region of Pakistan's Punjab province, which is feudalistic and backward. In a series of reports, titled "Children in Chains," I highlighted the pain and suffering of these children, numbering 27. The first report, titled "Seraiki Belt Where Children are in Chains," (*The Nation*, 25 June 1994) was based on my personal visit to the *madrassah*, during which I not only interviewed the Imam, Syed Bashir Hussain Shah Shirazi, and some children, I was also able to take some photographs of the children wearing shackles which were attached to huge wooden blocks, each weighing some 15 to 20 kilograms. Five to six boys were tied to one wooden block. Thus, they had to be together while sleeping, going to the toilet, or even changing the clothes through a special way. The chains were welded in order to minimize the chances of their escape.

Why were these children chained? So that they could memorize the Quran. "These boys get spoiled in the outside world, where everything is happening against God's will. Once they are chained, they are cut off from an un-Islamic civilization, and thus become Quran de Qaidi (prisoners of the Quran)," Imam Shirazi was quoted in my first report. Like my story on Zainab, the report was picked by the foreign press. The BBC World later televised a documentary on the rise of militant and sectarian Islam in Pakistan, which also narrated the harrowing tale of the chained children. For my part, I did two follow-up opinion write-ups on the issue, titled "A Tale of Human Misery and Ignorance" and "In Feudal World, Human Rights have No Place," soon after publishing the scoop.

Since ours is constitutionally an Islamic state, when it comes to any wrongful act being committed in the name of Islam, the rulers usually hesitate from taking any prompt action. For they fear retaliation from reactionary Islamic forces. The same happened in the case of my initial reporting on the 'Children in Chains' issue, as the government did not express any concern. Forced by the government's inaction, I planned another tour to the *madrassah*. Since I had already disclosed the issue in the press, the second visit to the *madrassah* could be risky. Fortunately, a delegation of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) and Geneva-based Defense for Children International along with photographers accompanied me to the *madrassah*, where we found the children to be in the same painful state. While Imam Shirazi was leading the prayers in the mosque, we managed to take their photographs. Once again, the children were interviewed. So was Imam Shirazi, who behaved angrily. He admitted that although there was no provision in Islam for imparting the Quranic learning by force, he was performing "this sacred act" only to help the "parents to reform their children."

"Where Children are Still in Chains" was the title of my second report carried by the paper on 7 July 1994, which further highlighted the plight of the children in chains and the insensitivity of the government on the matter. Consequently, the government had to act. The

local police and civil administration raided the premises of the *madrassah* on 11 July and all the children were freed. However, the main culprit in this case, Imam Shirazi was neither arrested nor tried in the court. So, I titled my last report in the children in chains series as “Chain the Children and Get Away with the Crime,” which exposed the government for its lack of courage and conviction in nabbing the culprit. Written with passion, it deplored the outcome of a stage-managed enquiry on the issue conducted by the Crime Branch of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA).

Despite the fact that the Human Rights Cell of the Ministry of Law and Parliamentary Affairs, in its report to the Prime Minister, had recommended strict legal action against Imam Shirazi, the FIA report stated that Imam Shirazi was “believed to be a pious man and has devoted his entire life to the teaching of Holy Quran...No complaint of torture/inhuman treatment has come on record against the Incharge of the *madrassah* during the probe.” Against this, the July 1994 issue of the *HRCF Newsletter* mentioned: “They (children) were all in leg fetters. The chain linked both the legs and the other end of it was clasped in an iron ring fastened in a heavy log of wood. Groups of four or five children were tethered to each such log. No child could move for his normal needs except with all the other joining with him to lift the log and move with him. The children lived thus confined within the few square yards of the school, round the clock, year after year. Many had been there for five to ten years...”

Waiting for the Messiah

The third human rights case which I unearthed in *The Nation* in 1994 was about over 200 young women locked within a compound and waiting for the messiah, Imam Mehdi, to descend from the sky and marry them. Titled “Where 200 Virgins are in Lock-up”, the report appeared in the paper’s 17 August 1994 edition. The walled compound, known as *darri*, was also located in the impoverished Seraiki region of Punjab, and the women confined there belonged to a cult of the Shiite Islam called Taharti. As soon as they reached the age of puberty, the girls were sent to the *darri* by their parents, who were mostly poor, ignorant and fatalistic peasants. They believed that only with the arrival of the messiah, the wishes of their daughters would come true, and that Imam Mehdi would marry only those women who sacrificed themselves for him.

The *darri* was being managed by Syed Talib Hussain Shah and his son Syed Jafar Hussain Shah. While requesting anonymity, for fear of persecution by the sect leaders, some educated people of the area, whom I interviewed in Islamabad, termed the confinement of such a large number of unmarried women as a crime against humanity. Allegations about illicit activities being sponsored by the custodians of the *darri* were also voiced. My debut report on the issue, based on credible information gathered from various sources, received wide coverage in the regional press and a couple of Western newspapers, including the *Guardian*. This encouraged me to visit the town of Jamman Shah where the *darri* was located, and, from there, write a two-part report, titled “Ghost Town Where Over 200 Women are Still in Custody,” and “Exploitation in the Name of Religion,” in the paper on October 11-12, 1994. Although it was not possible to enter the walled compound, I was able to photograph it from outside. These two reports were an investigative account of what was actually going on at the *darri*, and why no government authority had taken any action against its custodians. It was proved that the confinement of women in the *darri* was against their will, and that it was a common practice for the *darri*’s custodians and their compatriots to sexually abuse the young women of their choice.

The custodians of the *darri* were themselves feudal and related to, or enjoyed close friendship with, local politicians and lawyers. Thus, they enjoyed both legal and political protection. The police did plan to raid the *darri* after my first report was published, but the move was preempted by Niaz Jhakar, the elected Member of National Assembly (MNA) from that region. In his report to the then Federal Minister for Law and Parliamentary Affairs, the Deputy Commissioner of the region stated: "According to the preaching of Syed Talib Hussain Shah, the chief patron of the sub-sect, the marriage is only feasible after the appearance of Hazrat Imam Mehdi, and that will be the time when all social evils will disappear...Inside the *darri*, the girls/women remain mostly busy in studying the Holy Quran. No one knows about their exact number, as they are Tahartis and come from *pardah*-observing (veiled) Syed families. Not a single complaint has been lodged against the illegal confinement of such girls/women since 1956. Therefore, it appears that they reside inside the *darri* voluntarily and without any compulsion...No legal action or probe can be initiated under the prevailing laws, keeping in view the sanctity of *chadar* and *chardiwari* (scarf around a woman's body and boundary walls of a house), and that probing into the matter may cause unrest among Tahartis, in addition to law and order problem."

I published my last report on the issue on 29 October 1994, titled "Government Hesitant to Rescue Women in Jamman Shah Lock-up," which criticized the above report and urged the government for action. The Law Ministry did send a delegation of women to investigate the state of affairs at the *darri*, but the outcome of this lackluster effort on the government's part remained inconclusive. Today, the *darri* exists as such, and its custodians live as happily as before. As to what goes on with the hundreds of women confined within that walled compound, only they can tell us. For now, it remains a gory tale they have no one to tell to.

Lessons to Learn

Human rights reporting is reporting with a purpose and a mission. This is what differentiates it from other forms of reporting. One has to have a deep commitment towards human rights and an untiring ability to fight for them. Usually the factors causing human rights violations are ingrained so deeply in an ignorant and backward society that it is impossible to achieve success in the short-term, both in terms of bringing relief for the victims and guaranteeing due legal punishment for the perpetrators of the human rights violation. In the long-term, however, whether or not the victim is relieved and the perpetrator is punished, a sufficiently motivated reporting exercise on any given human rights case does make a difference.

For instance, it is clear from the above discussion that I was not at all able to bring relief to the victims and secure punishment for the culprits in the third case of women waiting for the messiah to marry; and, in the second case of children in chains, although the victims were finally freed, the culprit is still scot-free. It was only in the first case of Zainab Noor that the victim was sufficiently relieved, and the culprit was given the due legal punishment. Should this mean that I succeeded fully in the first case, partly in the second case, and failed totally in the third case?

The scope of reporting any single instance of human rights violation is not merely limited to the question of bringing relief to the victims and securing punishment for the perpetrators, it has its wider social implications. For instance, Zainab Noor's tale did not end when victim Zainab was relieved and culprit Qari Sharif was punished. Rather, it set a

precedent for future, warning potential culprits about the huge physical cost of such an act, and assuring the potential victims that they can rely on the government for due support in such an eventuality. In Pakistan, the instances of wife beating—and even honour killing—occur commonly. The only difference in the case of Zainab’s husband, Qari Sharif, was that he took the commonly practiced phenomenon of a husband committing violence against his wife to an unimaginable level. The national media debate which occurred on Zainab’s case helped generate a public opinion critical of male-domineering tendencies in Pakistani society, particularly the issue of domestic violence. As for the political will on the part of the leadership, it is obvious that without Prime Minister Bhutto’s personal interest in the matter, Zainab would have eventually succumbed to the injuries and died within a week. But it is also true that Ms Bhutto spared no opportunity in politically exploiting the Zainab issue throughout her second government tenure. Instead, she could have used the issue in launching a broader national scheme for protecting the rights of women in Pakistani society. I was awarded a gold medal, which I accepted not because it came from Ms Bhutto but from the Prime Minister of Pakistan.

Like Zainab’s case, the reporting of children in chains case also had wider social impact. Even if the culprit, Imam Shirazi, was not punished, the years-old practice of chaining the children for the purpose of Quranic learning at the *madrassah* came to an end. Not just this. Since the time the children in chains issue came to the fore, a number of *madrassahs* engaged in similar practices and situated in other parts of the country were raided and the children chained there were freed by the police. This is a big social change, given the fact that such inhuman practices have been going on for ages. Even if Imam Shirazi escaped legal punishment, it is highly unlikely that he will ever attempt to repeat the crime again in future. For he could escape only the court trial, not the trial conducted by the media, which sufficiently exposed his monstrous approach to human life. It is true that in the third case of women awaiting the messiah for marriage, neither the victims were relieved nor the perpetrators were punished. But the important thing was that the tragic issue was reported and debated in the Press, including some foreign newspapers. Before that, even the general public was largely unaware of the existence of such medieval traditions. Thus, to some extent, the purpose of human rights reporting in the third case, was served: that is, creating public awareness about the extent to which women rights were being violated in the name of Islam.

Who to blame? What were the factors behind the occurrence of such horrific incidents of the violations of the rights of woman and child? My human rights endeavors helped me to conclude that there were mainly three factors responsible for such incidents. Socially, it was the prevalence of ignorance and poverty among the masses; politically, it was the lack of will on the part of politicians and their insatiable lust for power; and, religiously, it was the misinterpretation and misuse of Islam by the bigoted Imams or Mullahs. It was out of ignorance and poverty that children were sent to *madrassahs* to be chained in order to memorize the Quran. Similarly, the parents who send their daughters to the *darri* to wait for the messiah for marriage belong to a poverty-ridden and backward section of the Seraiki peasantry. Inside the walled compound of the *darri*, the women cook food, which is available to them without any cost. Similarly, the chained children got their free food in the *madrassah*, which was being funded primarily with the Zakat money provided by local feudal-lords. The source of funding for the *darri*, whose custodians were themselves feudal, was found out to be the same. Thus, socially speaking, one important lesson to be learned from the above last two cases of human rights reporting was that in a feudalistic society such inhuman practices do occur, since, by its very nature, feudalism survives and thrives on keeping the peasantry poor and ignorant.

It is a fact that political authorities tried to protect the perpetrators of the human rights violations by providing a concocted and untruthful version of the ground reality. Why do politicians display the lack of political will on issues involving fundamental right to life or liberty of an individual, particularly woman and child? For petty power considerations! Thus, in the second and third cases, since the culprits had political connections—or they were considered by the local feudal-cum-political elites as having credible electoral value in their respective political constituencies—neither the local police and civil administration, nor the provincial government, nor the federal government was prepared to take any concrete action against the culprits. All of these institutions of the state/government were influenced by feudal-cum-political elites who have a stake in the continuity of fundamentally oppressive social trends and traditions. In Pakistan’s case, a human rights reporter faces an additional challenge from the state authorities: that arises usually when the media in the country’s key rival, India, starts to highlight any instance of human rights violation reported in the Pakistani press. In my case, all of the above cases of women and child rights violations were covered extensively by the Indian media, leading some state officials in Pakistan to suspect whether there was an “Indian hand” behind my reporting pursuits on human rights.

More importantly, all the cases of women/child rights violations that I reported had one common feature: Islam, which was being misused or misinterpreted. The culprits were all Imams or Mullahs—the individuals associated with the Islamic places of worship—mosque, *madrassah* or *darri*. Was something wrong with Islam itself? Or, was it that people were being exploited, humiliated or disgraced in the name of religion? The truth is that Islam does not ask women to wait for the messiah to marry. It does not ask an Imam to chain the children in order to teach them the Quran by heart. Islam does not sanction any form of violence against women. Thus, as far as the causes for the above violations of human rights are concerned, there is nothing wrong with Islam per se. What is wrong is how Islam is being interpreted or abused. It is the exploitation of people in the name of religion that is the heart of the matter in poverty-ridden, ignorant societies of the developing world, particularly the world of Islam. Islam has neither been interpreted in harmony with the requirements of the modern age, nor have the ruling elites made any credible attempt to prevent its misuse by the Islamic clergy in connivance with feudalistic vested political interests. The leadership lacks the required courage and boldness to re-interpret the Quran and Hadieth in a manner that corresponds with the demands of our modern age. Or, is it that all of the above is not possible at all given the impossibility of Islamic re-interpretation or at least the practical difficulties in securing universal acceptance of such a re-interpretation across a highly divisive world of Islam?