

A requiem for Reshma

A hundred beats

Sunday, December 02, 2007

Fatima Bhutto

I first met Reshma in April of last year. I was in Larkana and in the car with my mother on the way to a function when we received a call from a local hospital. 'There's a case you need to come and see' the caller said 'come quickly'.

When we reached the hospital, a government run facility with patients lying in the corridors and hallways, we were led to a small room separated only by a curtain. Reshma was lying on the hospital bed covered in blood. Her legs bore bruises and cuts all across them. She was crying in pain and the floor beneath her was littered with stained bandages. Reshma had been raped. She had been held hostage by man, locally known for his muscle, for over a year. He had repeatedly raped her over the course of that time, sometimes chaining her to the bed to do so. That day, April 5, Reshma escaped and came to the hospital.

As she told us her story, her mother weeping silently besides her, Reshma begged for help. In Pakistan, thanks to the all-encompassing nature of the Hudood Ordinance, she was not a victim. In the eyes of the law, she was a criminal. The police refused to file an FIR on her behalf. The rapist had considerable power in the city, and so the police illegally denied Reshma her inalienable right to register a police report. Without police approval, a rape test cannot be administered. In Pakistan, where power is so absolutely centralized, you need police permission to have a rape test done -- a test that includes a gynecological exam and forensic swabbing and takes all of ten minutes.

My mother called the police officer standing guard outside Reshma's flimsily protected room. She asked him why he was not filing a report and sanctioning the rape test. He shrugged his shoulders and muttered something about not being able to deal with the process. After repeatedly asking that he find someone capable of dealing with Reshma, the officer finally complied. An FIR was lodged, transcribed in Sindhi -- Reshma's native language. But there was one more problem -- all the doctors on call at the hospital that day were men. In Pakistan only a woman doctor can administer a rape test. No matter that time is of the essence in such cases, only a woman doctor will do. We spent the next hour searching the city for a female doctor to treat and diagnose Reshma.

Let me backtrack a bit, it's important you get to know Reshma too. Reshma was a native of Larkana, my hometown. She was a thirty year old illiterate woman with a complicated past. Married at a young age she was the mother of an adolescent girl. Reshma's first marriage ended under dubious circumstances; she says that after her rapist kidnapped her, her husband disowned her instead of trying to save her. Once her husband found out that Reshma married the local gangster under duress he forbade her from ever seeing her child again.

When she was discharged from the hospital, she asked us not to leave her. Returning to Dar ul Aman, the government run shelter for abused women, was out of the question. Reshma had been there before and she did not want to be imprisoned again. Their conditions are pitiful; Reshma told us she preferred jail over Dar ul Aman. She was young, she wanted to be free. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan advised us to look into a safe haven in Karachi, Panah

Panah, Urdu for 'shelter', founded in 2001 with the backing of Amnesty International, provides a safe and clean shelter for victims of domestic or marital abuse. They offer refuge to women traumatized by violence, sexual or psychological, often taking in their children and relatives too. Panah's services include access to free legal aid and defense, free medical aid and treatment, and free counseling and psychiatric care. The majority of women who take sanctuary at Panah also receive vocational training, informal education, and relaxation therapy ranging from yoga sessions to Koran classes.

That evening we boarded Reshma on a plane to Karachi. She was wearing a white shalwar kameez and a large white chador. Reshma didn't cry as the plane took off. She smiled shyly and asked what our names were -- a formality we didn't have time for at the hospital. She was precious, she had a new chance to live and she radiated hope.

But Reshma did not last long at Panah. Reshma wanted to be free, she was young and she was determined to live her life. Between April 5th and August of this year, Reshma was admitted into Panah three times. She spent a total of 27 days there. Every need was catered to and every luxury -- and by luxury I mean the extravagance of care and aid -- was given to her. But Reshma wanted to be free. She had escaped death too many times before and she was not willing to surrender her life to something as abstract as safety.

In a country where the rape victim is often suspect, it is no surprise that people pointed blame at Reshma. They said she was loose, that she was immoral. Her detractors went so far as to suggest rape was the

price she paid for leading a 'fast life'. Several people who we asked for help in Larkana, men whose name I cannot take because it shames me to my core that men like them exist, told us that there was nothing they could do to help Reshma, she was a prostitute they sneered and told us we shouldn't have helped her either. No matter what Reshma was or wasn't, there is no excuse for brutalizing a woman with rape. Rape is a crime of anger; it is an act of violent power. It is not motivated by sexuality or by desire. Reshma was a victim. She was a woman, she was born a victim.

In August of this year Reshma asked Panah to help her legally file for a khula divorce against her rapist. He had married her by force and had continued to stalk and threaten her since she escaped Larkana in April of 2006. The khula case was in the courts, so Reshma -- living with her family members in a katchi abadi in Karachi -- carried on with her life. The case would be delayed, as so often the most basic cases are because the majority of lawyers do not devote themselves to the needs of the poor who cannot afford their services. It would also be backlogged by courts that have more important issues to contend with. But Reshma was undeterred; she carried on with her life. The case would be decided eventually and soon she would be safe, she always wanted a life that was free and unshackled.

They say she met a man, a man she could have loved. In Pakistan, a country where the authority to test a rape victim lies with the police, where a rapist is only a supporting actor in a crime of utter violence, where justice is so often denied to those dispossessed of hope, in this country love can also be a crime. It can be a way to defame those who submit to its call.

On October 7, at the start of Ramazan, Reshma was at Quaid-e-Azam's mazaar in Karachi. She was not alone. She was with a friend, a male friend. Perhaps it was her beloved. But there was someone else there too, someone who was watching and had been watching Reshma for quite some time. As Iftar time drew near Reshma got up to go home. As she moved towards the crowded bus stop that would deliver her to her family in time to break the fast, Yar Muhammad, the man who raped and tortured Reshma for over a year of her life appeared. He took out a gun and pointed it at Reshma. He shot her several times at close range.

An Edhi ambulance rushed Reshma to Civil Hospital. Reshma died that day. Yar Muhammad escaped. He is still free today. Reshma's khula case was granted the very next day.

If you or someone you know is a victim of violence -- physical or

psychological -- contact Panah at (021) 2790330, panah@cyber.net.pk.
To support Panah visit www.panahshelter.org