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Bano's Seven Steps: Confronting Honour Killings and the Culture That Enables Them

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Bano Satazkai's tragic death in the village of Dagari is a stark reminder of the brutal reality of honour killings in Pakistan. Forced into a death sentence by a local *jirga* (a traditional tribal council), Bano's choice to be with Ehsan Samalani, a decision rejected by her family, cost her life. Her final act, calmly walking seven steps before execution, captured in a viral video, challenges us to face the deep-rooted violence cloaked in tradition. Honour killings, murders justified by alleged "shame" brought upon families, remain a widespread problem in Pakistan, enabled by social norms and a legal system often failing to protect victims.

Honour killing is commonly defined as the murder of individuals, primarily women, accused of dishonoring their families through personal choices such as marriage, divorce, or even

clothing. In 2024 alone, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reported 590 honour killings, including 405 women, numbers believed to underrepresent the true scale, especially in rural regions dominated by tribal codes and limited law enforcement access. The state's response tends to be reactive rather than proactive, often prompted only by viral media attention rather than consistent legal action.

This problem transcends education and class. Notable figures like Nawab Akbar Bugti, a product of elite schools such as Aitchison College and Oxford University, have publicly defended honour killings as a cultural imperative. In a 2006 interview with The Guardian's Declan Walsh, Bugti chillingly recounted how a couple who eloped were murdered to "restore honour," illustrating how even well-educated elites sometimes prioritize traditional customs over individual rights. Such entrenched attitudes reveal the challenge of dismantling the cultural acceptance of violence.

At the heart of honour killing lies a patriarchal social order where female autonomy is seen as a threat to family and communal identity. Concepts like *izzat* (honour) and *sharam* (shame) serve as mechanisms of social control, enforced by relatives, elders, and community members alike. This collective ownership of honour means a woman's choices are rarely her own but belong to the family's reputation.

Pakistan's legal framework has struggled to address honour killings effectively. Until 2016, a legal loophole allowed perpetrators, often family members, to avoid punishment if forgiven by the victim's relatives. Although the Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences in the name or pretext of Honour) Act of 2016 closed this gap, enforcement remains weak. Police often fail to register complaints (First Information Reports, or FIRs), investigations stall, and witnesses face intimidation. The justice system's slow pace and lack of protective measures result in low conviction rates, allowing killers to act with near impunity.

Beyond legal reform, the country must confront the underlying cultural mindset. Honour killings are not relics of distant villages but persist in attitudes that blame women for "dishonour", whether for seeking divorce, dressing a certain way, or simply exercising personal freedom. These beliefs sustain a climate where violence is justified and normalized.

Bano Satakzai's final seven steps symbolize the courage to defy this violent tradition. She faced death without pleading, claiming what little agency she had left in choosing how she died. For Pakistan, truly honoring Bano means going beyond punishing her killers. It requires

a national reckoning with the ideas that make honour killings possible and a commitment to protecting the fundamental rights of all citizens, especially women.

Until that reckoning happens, many more will face the same fate, and society will remain stuck, while Bano took those seven steps forward, the rest of the nation remains standing still.