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Shanti's Tragedy Highlights Marital Violence as Human Rights Crisis

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This article outlines the fatal assault of 19-year-old Shanti in Lyari, the public reaction by actor Ayesha Omar, and Pakistan's legal stance on marital violence, which recently saw its first conviction under amended criminal law. It underscores urgent reforms needed to uphold women's rights in a society weakened by misogyny and legal ambiguity.

Ayesha Omar, a prominent Pakistani actress, posted on Instagram: "May your soul rest in eternal peace. May Allah give your family strength... I'm sorry we failed you, Shanti. May

justice be served.” She denounced the patriarchal norms that subject women to “misogynistic” violence and urged societal transformation.

Shanti (age 19) reportedly married Ashok in mid–June. Within days, she faced brutal physical harm, beatings, threats to kill, sexual violence, and returned to her family on June 30 in dire health. She disclosed the abuse to her brother Saiyon. After initial private hospital care, on July 4, she was taken to the Civil Hospital’s Trauma Centre in Karachi, where she remained under treatment until her death on July 24. Police records confirm that her brother filed an FIR (First Information Report) on July 5. The suspect, Asho, son of Mohan, was arrested immediately and remains in judicial custody as the investigation continues.

Pakistan’s law now criminalises non–consensual spousal sex under Section 377 of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), the offence of “unnatural offences”, rather than under Section 375, which addresses rape. This reflects the ambiguity in prosecuting marital rape despite the 2021 amendment to Section 375 that defined consent. In January 2024, a Karachi sessions court delivered what was widely accepted as Sindh’s first conviction in a marital rape context, sentencing a husband to three years’ rigorous imprisonment and a Rs 30,000 fine under Section 377. Advocates hailed it as a legal breakthrough, though critics noted the lighter penalties compared with rape under Section 375.

Despite legal reforms, including the Women’s Protection Act, the Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offense of Rape) Act 2016, and the Protection of Women Against Violence Bill 2015, conviction rates remain dismally low. In 2024, only about 0.4 percent of reported rape and honour–killing cases ended in conviction; many provinces recorded no convictions at all.

Pakistan’s deeply patriarchal culture discourages survivors from reporting sexual violence, viewing it as a “family matter” or shameful taboo. The belief that marriage implies permanent consent remains entrenched, despite legal developments. Shanti’s death is a haunting emblem of how legal gaps and cultural norms allow violence against women to persist. It should catalyse broader enforcement of consent–based protections, faster police response, public awareness campaigns, and full implementation of existing laws. Only then can Pakistan begin to properly protect women’s fundamental human rights to safety, dignity, and bodily autonomy.