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Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

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Responses to Information Requests

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4 December 2007

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Pakistan: Circumstances under which single women could live alone
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

An adjunct professor of gender studies and international politics at the University of Denver who has worked for the past ten years with women's and human rights groups in Pakistan provided the following information in correspondence dated 26 November 2007 to the Research Directorate:

It is very hard for a single woman to live alone both in urban and rural areas. ... It depends on age, class, education, and urban or rural setting. Young unmarried/divorced women in all classes in urban areas find it difficult to live alone. They cannot get apartments to be rented. If they own a property, they can more conveniently opt to live alone but again there is social pressure around them and they have to face all kinds of gossips and scandals. In such case, age is their biggest problem. Older women can live alone but still they feel insecure socially and physically. We do have examples now in the big cities where highly educated and economically independent women opt to live alone but their percentage is very low. In the rural areas they mostly live with joint family even if they do not get along with them. ...

A representative of a non-governmental organization specializing in women's issues, specifically regarding women affected by Islamic laws or customs, provided the following information, which represents her personal point of view, in correspondence dated 20 November 2007 to the Research Directorate. After having lived in Pakistan for one year, the Representative stated that she had only encountered one woman living alone; the Representative explained that this woman was able to live alone because she was an activist, was aware of her rights and understood the cultural system which permitted her to "navigate daily challenges." She added that she was aware of other women who had tried to rent apartments on their own but were unable to do so because of resistance from landlords who assumed they were planning to open a brothel. The Representative specified that it is also rare for men to live alone in Pakistan because people are expected to live with their families until they get married and set up households of their own. The Representative added that even though it is not illegal for women to live alone, there would be obstacles for a woman to try to rent an apartment or house on her own and "[c]ultural pressures and personal security would continue to be issues, especially if it was common knowledge [that] a woman was living alone."

A representative of Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre, a civil society organization in Pakistan promoting and advocating women's rights for the past 30 years, provided corroboration in correspondence dated 4 December 2007 to the Research Directorate that the situation of women living alone Pakistan depends on their social and economic status. The Representative also provided the following information:

There has been an increasing trend in both urban and rural areas where husbands leave home for better employment options abroad. So wives of those usually live alone but the important aspect in such living situation is social acceptance and support from the family. Financial stability is often considered a strength by such women and they do not face negative criticism.

But for a divorced or a widowed single woman the context varies based on the familial support. First let me clarify family laws provisions related to dissolution of marriage. According to Muslim family laws in Pakistan, a Muslim man has a unilateral right to divorce his wife. This is known as Talaq, whereas a Muslim woman can [only] dissolve her marriage with the intervention of court. She does not have the unilateral right to pronounce talaq unless that right is delegated to her by the husband under marriage contract but this right is usually not delegated to [the] wife. While under Christian Family [laws], Christian women seeking to legally dissolve marriage confront such obstacles in terms of very strict grounds to prove, that many have ended up converting. And conversion means termination of any link with their community.

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Parents do not encourage their daughters to return home for fear of being stigmatized a 'divorcee' which [is] tantamount to being a social pariah while husband's ill conduct is not questioned generally. But women always have to face criticism by the society and survival for single woman not having support from the family becomes toughest. This complexity coupled with the lack of information and access to State support institutions have intertwined to suppress women from taking steps for themselves. At governmental level there does not exist community social support centres thus resulting in confining women to abusive relationships lacking ability to resist violations. But even if a woman is strong enough to speak up for her rights and challenge oppressive structures this does not make her immune from consequences of her step which include isolation and social rejection especially in uneducated contexts. Government run shelters lack appropriate measures as they aim at providing temporary stay and also there have not been any policy measures for rehabilitation of these women when the duration of stay expires.

Single mothers see children as support and often do not want to be deprived of their custody. They have to arrange for better facilities for their children. Although the law puts primary responsibility for child maintenance upon fathers, ... this can not be enforced without the intervention of court. And very few women have finances to arrange for suitable lawyers. However the win situation does not automatically bind fathers to pay maintenance amount to children. There is also a strong misperception among women generally that demanding finances from fathers for child maintenance would mean losing custody of the child. Therefore under such misperceptions, women do not tend to claim maintenance for their children unless they are rightly advised by some lawyers or women's rights activists.

Social context for widowed women slightly differs from divorced women. Widowhood is not stigmatized unlike divorce. But young widow women often face family pressure to remarry and divergence from these settled trends results in economic insecurity.

Single women living alone also have to look for livelihood options (e.g. paying for house rent etc.) and in instances where they do not have appropriate qualifications, they are trapped in the vicious cycle of cheap labour and often face sexual harassment. But within present contexts, [the] majority of young educated women from remote areas come to main cities for better employment opportunities. They face a number of challenges including lack of working women hostels, procedural complications in getting admission and negative societal attitudes towards these women hostel[s]. In Lahore (second largest city of Pakistan) alone where government estimates now put the population at somewhere around 10 million, there are only two working women hostels and very few private ones. Also moving out alone on public transportation is one of the greatest challenges. Talking to a young woman living in the Government Hostel, one finds that these women have to deal with a variety of pressures ranging from non-acceptance from immediate family members to harassment from male (bus drivers, vendors etc.). (Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre 4 Dec. 2007)

The following information was provided in correspondence received on 22 November 2007 by a professor of law at the University of Warwick who specializes in women's human rights and gender and the law, who has written various publications on Pakistan and who is also a professor at the University of Oslo:

The response to your question depends upon the circumstances, location, socio-economic, educational and professional status of the single female. Generally, it would be accurate to say that single women are rarely able to live on their own without a male member of the family in Pakistan. Reasons for this are numerous but they primarily stem from custom and culture that requires a woman to have a male family member to be in a protective and supervisory role. Society also frowns upon women living on their own and would not help the reputation of the single woman. You may find one in a million single woman who has the means and can live in a big city with helpers, etc. to assist and protect her. This of course is a minority and an exception rather than the rule.

Regarding relocation, it is important to bear in mind that for relocation you need money and resources. The government has no services it can provide to support anyone without resources such as housing, etc.

Similarly, the South Asian Media Net, an independent website providing news, information and analyses covering the South Asian region, indicates the following in its analysis of the situation of women in Pakistan:

The social and cultural context of Pakistani society is predominantly patriarchal. ... Since the notion of male honor and izzat (honor) is linked with women's sexual behavior, their sexuality is considered a potential threat to the honor of the family. Therefore, women's mobility is strictly restricted and controlled through the system of purdah, sex segregation, and violence against them. (n.d.)

The South Asian Media Net adds that because women lack the skills to compete for employment in the public arena, they end up socially and economically dependent towards men (n.d.). Purdah, which translates to "screen" or "veil," represents the practice of secluding women from public life by having them wear concealing clothing and by using barriers such as walls, curtains and screens in the home which, as a consequence, has deprived women of economic independence (King's College n.d.).

In an article on a new trend for single people to live on their own in Pakistan published in the weekly Pakistani magazine *The Review*, the author indicates that it is rare for single women to live alone in Pakistan mainly because of security concerns and social constraints (29 Apr. 2004).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

- Adjunct Professor of gender studies and international politics, University of Denver. 26 November 2007. Correspondence.
- King's College. N.d. "Purdah." <http://departments.kings.edu/womens_history/purdah.html> [Accessed 22 Nov. 2007]
- Professor of law, University of Warwick. 22 November 2007. Correspondence.
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The Review [Karachi]. 29 April 2004. Arifa Jinnah. "All for One, One for All."
<<http://www.dawn.com/weekly/review/archive/040429/review1.htm>> [Accessed 21 Nov. 2007]

Shirkat Gah Women's Resource Centre. 4 December 2007. Correspondence.

South Asian Media Net. N.d. "Situational Analysis of Women in Pakistan."
<http://www.southasianmedia.net/profile/pakistan/pakistan_women.cfm> [Accessed 22 Nov. 2007]

Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: Attempts to contact a professor of International Studies at the University of Oregon were unsuccessful.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International (AI), British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), *Daily Times* [Lahore], European Country of Origin Information Network (ecoi.net), Freedom House, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP), Human Rights Watch (HRW), Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), Ministry of Women Development, *The Nation* [Lahore], Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), United Kingdom Home Office Country Information, United States Department of State, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), World News Connection (WNC).

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