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Responses to Information Requests

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26 November 2009

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Pakistan: Resources available to female victims of violence in Karachi, Islamabad and Lahore
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

Police Stations

In May 2007, the Secretary of the Ministry of Women Development of the government of Pakistan delivered a presentation on government initiatives designed to foster social, economic and legal empowerment of women (22 May 2007, 1). The presentation states that "separate complaint cells" have been created at existing police stations for female victims of violence; these cells are said to be supervised by women police officers and can be accessed 24 hours a day (Pakistan 22 May 2007, 6).

Information made available on the United Nations (UN) Secretary-General's Database on Violence Against Women indicates that there are nine women's police stations in Pakistan, designed for women who do not want to lodge a complaint at regular police stations; Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore each have a women's police station (UN 28 Sept. 2009a). There are also several women's complaint centres at existing police stations, including one in Islamabad; these centres are said to offer legal assistance and counselling to female victims of violence (ibid.). The website of the non-governmental organization (NGO) Society for Advancement of Community, Health, Education and Training (SACHET) corroborates that there are women's police stations in Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore, and specifies that there are three women's police cells in Karachi (n.d.).

Information on the UN Database on Violence Against Women indicates that no evaluation of the women's police stations and women's complaint centres is known to have been undertaken (UN 28 Sept. 2009a). In a February 2007 report on domestic violence, Médecins du monde, an international humanitarian organization (n.d.), reported that in cases involving domestic violence, women's police stations tended to act as mediators between couples, instead of offering women protection (Médecins du monde Feb. 2007, 21).

Shirkat Gah is a women's resource centre with 30 years of experience facilitating access to information and resources, as well as working to improve policies and laws that affect women in Pakistan (n.d.). Shirkat Gah's legal department provided the following information in 20 November 2009 correspondence:

In most city districts, as in Lahore, there is only one Women's Police Station functioning. (In Lahore there are also four women complaint cells established in four police stations i.e. in the Gulberg, Muslim Town, Kotwali and Cantt police stations respectively). It is the responsibility of the designated persons in this police station to take any victim of violence to the concerned hospital for her treatment, to lodge an FIR (First Information Report), to diligently pursue the investigation and then the court hearing. The staff of the Women's Police Station can request assistance from any male police station in the area of the accused/culprit's place of residence.

The Women's Police Station faces many problems; they have only one vehicle for use with a very limited petrol allowance, they are understaffed and overburdened, and they have been granted less authority than their male counterparts; for example, they cannot register an FIR without the prior approval of the Deputy Superintendent of Police and Superintendent of Police. Even if the case has been registered the following investigation remains problematic. The investigation requires visiting the area of incidence, collecting evidence and arresting the accused, but lack of resources such as staff and transport make the task extremely challenging. No special treatment is afforded to female victims of violence, nor is any modern equipment made available to facilitate addressing their grievances.

Shelter Provisions

The South Manchester Law Centre (SMLC), in partnership with Manchester Metropolitan University, published a January 2008 report that evaluated the services available to female victims of violence in Pakistan and indicated the following in regard to crisis centres in Pakistan:

A crisis centre is the first stage of contact for a woman before admission to a shelter. Crisis centres play a crucial role in assessing a woman's needs and the risks she faces. A woman is never turned away without full assessment of her case. If necessary, immediate action

is taken to protect her. Lawyers, advice workers and counsellors are available to offer immediate support to women at the centres. After the initial assessment the woman is then referred to a shelter. (Sec. 6.2.1)

The SMLC report also states that when a woman is accepted into a shelter, shelter staff will immediately inform the woman's family (Jan. 2008, Sec. 6.2.1). Additionally, the report indicates that crisis centre staff assist women with "mediation and reconciliation" (SMLC Jan. 2008, Sec. 6.2.1).

The Secretary of the Ministry of Women Development's 2007 presentation stated that the government of Pakistan was expanding its network of women's centres and shelters at the district level; these centres and shelters provide legal support to female victims of violence (Pakistan 22 May 2007, 6). A 2008 article by the UN Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) states that the Ministry of Women Development runs 10 crisis centres located in major cities of Pakistan (11 Mar. 2008). The website of the Ministry of Women Development contains information on the Islamabad Women's Centre, which offers free legal aid and medical care (Pakistan n.d.). The Centre also offers accommodation, education and vocational skills training (ibid.). The website does not contain information on similar centres in Lahore or Karachi.

An evaluation of nine government-funded women's centres, called Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Centers for Women, was conducted from 12 June 2007 to 2 July 2007 by a government and NGO representative (Pakistan 12 June 2007 - 2 July 2007). The evaluation states that the centres have provided assistance to 8,000 survivors of violence; the services target impoverished women and are said to have saved a number of women from "life-threatening" circumstances (ibid.). However, the evaluation indicates that the initial goal to provide shelter to women in emergency situations has changed, with a higher percentage of women receiving counselling and legal aid, rather than shelter (ibid.). The report also indicates that Karachi did not have a temporary shelter, but that the centre in Islamabad offers exemplary shelter service (ibid.).

The Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Centers for Women offer shelter for 24 hours and then refer women to Darul Aman centres, which are provincially administered centres (UN 29 Sept. 2009b). The United States (US) Department of State's 2009 *Trafficking in Persons Report* states that there are 276 Darul Aman centres in Pakistan that offer medical treatment, skills training and legal assistance to women and children who are victims of violence (16 June 2009, 232). The SMLC report indicates that women can stay at the Darul Aman centres for a maximum of three months, though, in some instances, women are able to stay until their cases are resolved (Jan. 2008, Sec. 6.3).

According to Médecins du monde, the mobility of the women staying at Darul Aman centres is restricted (Feb. 2007, 27, 28) and the staff at the centres are not trained to work with victims of violence (Feb. 2007, 29). In *State of Human Rights in 2008*, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) reported on the conditions of the Darul Aman shelters, indicating that they "retained their notoriety for being similar to detention centres with curfews, ill treatment and absence of a gender-sensitive environment" (Mar. 2009, 128). Shirkat Gah's legal department indicated that the quality of the free legal aid offered by government-run Darul Amans and shelter homes is "questionable, as complaints of inadequate handling of cases and lawyers not giving priority to free cases are quite frequent" (20 Nov. 2009).

The 2008 SMLC report offers the following summary of shelters in Pakistan:

shelters for women are seen as a temporary refuge where they can stay until their problems are resolved. This could be in the form of reconciliation, re-marriage or divorce. There is no provision for aftercare work or rehabilitation except for one refuge in Karachi that actively assists women with rehabilitation. This is done in the form of finding work, re-housing and giving financial assistance for a short-term period. (Jan. 2008, Sec. 6.4)

The report indicates that, in general, the lack of follow-up work is of "particular concern, because once women have reconciled or are forced to return to their husbands, no contact is maintained with them" (SMLC Jan. 2008, Sec. 6.6). Additionally, the SMLC report indicates that both government-run and private shelters do not admit boys over the age of 5 years with their mothers, whereas previously boys were admitted into shelters until the age of 11 years (ibid., Sec. 6.3). Shirkat Gah's legal department states that male children 10 years of age and older are not permitted to reside with their mothers in government or private shelters (20 Nov. 2009).

Describing the conditions of NGO services for female victims of violence in general terms, the SMLC report indicates that while some of the NGOs researched are experienced in dealing with women's issues, many NGOs located in urban centres are under resourced and have to limit the assistance offered (Jan. 2008, Sec. 6.7). With respect to legal assistance offered by a small number of NGOs and law firms in urban centres of Pakistan, Shirkat Gah's legal department indicated that "the number of women they are able to assist is very small in proportion to the number in need" (20 Nov. 2009).

Shirkat Gah's legal department also indicated that although there are no official restrictions that would limit a rural woman's access to medical treatment facilities and shelters located in urban centres, there is no system in place to facilitate their relocation (20 Nov. 2009). Shirkat Gah further explained that women from rural locations must pursue criminal cases with their own resources, should they relocate to an urban centre, while family cases that are administered by family courts can be pursued "irrespective of the victims' place of birth or residence," since the address of the shelter where the woman is staying is "sufficient for the [family] case proceedings to begin" (20 Nov. 2009).

The SMLC report provides details on the specific provisions offered by an internationally funded shelter, called Dastak, and a privately funded shelter, called Edhi, that both operate in Lahore (SMLC Jan. 2008, Sec. 6.4). In addition to providing food and shelter, women staying at Dastak and Edhi can access free legal representation (ibid.). The report also describes the services offered at an NGO shelter in Karachi, called Pannah, which also provides food and legal assistance (ibid.). Additionally, both Edhi and Pannah offer free medical treatment (ibid.).

The SMLC reports that women can stay at Dastak for three months, whereas the Edhi shelter does not have a limit on the duration of accommodations (ibid.). The report also indicates that staff at most shelters encourage women to reconcile with their partners, "because of the generally held view that women cannot survive without men in Pakistan" (ibid.). In the 2008 SMLC report, the Director of HRCP indicated that women cannot rent accommodations alone in Pakistan (Jan. 2008, Sec. 6.7.1). Médecins du monde similarly indicates that it is not socially acceptable for women to live alone in Pakistan; though the report also indicates that because it is easier to find employment in Lahore, a woman may be able to live independently there (Feb. 2007, 33).

Help Lines

There is a phone number that women can call in order to access shelter accommodations at the federally funded women's centres (UN 28 Sept. 2009b). However, the 2007 evaluation of the Shaheed Benazir Bhutto Centers for Women explained, without providing details, that the "'helpline service' does not exist in real terms" (Pakistan 12 June - 2 July 2007). The 2008 SMLC report indicates that the above-mentioned Edhi shelter also operates a helpline (Jan. 2008, Sec. 6.4). An October 2009 article in the Karachi-based *Business Recorder* reports that the All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA) established a legal aid call centre in August 2009 that is based in Karachi; however, the article indicates that information about the centre is not well publicized (3 Oct. 2009).

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 sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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Oral sources: Attempts to contact the Ministry of Women Development - Government of Pakistan, Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid (LHRLA) in Karachi, AGHS Law Associates, and the Centre for Legal Aid Assistance and Settlement (CLAAS) in Lahore were unsuccessful. The Aurat Foundation did not provide information within the time constraints of this Response. A professor of religious studies at the

University of Louisville and a professor of women's studies at Wilfred Laurier University were unable to provide information on this Response.

Internet sites, including: All Pakistan Women's Association (APWA), Amnesty International (AI), Asian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Asylum Aid, Aurat Foundation, *Dawn* [Karachi], Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), European Country of Origin Information Network (ecoi.net), International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan (INRFVVP), Jagriti International, Jazbah Magazine, Organisation mondiale contre la torture (OMCT), United Nations (UN) Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), UN Information Centre Islamabad, UN Pakistan, Women Living Under Muslim Laws (WLUML), World Bank, Zina Laws in Pakistan.

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