

A Horror Story Every Woman Must Read

How could a human being—let alone a husband—disfigure a person in this way? It happened to Zahida Parveen, and it happens to thousands of other female victims of “honor violence” each year. In a *Glamour* exclusive, Parveen tells her brave story of recovery—and we show how you can help.

By Liz Welch

IT WAS A SEEMINGLY ORDINARY NIGHT THREE years ago when Zahida Parveen, then 30, was asleep in a room with her two small children. Her family was poor, but she was happy with her life with Mehmood Iqbal, her husband of four years. All that changed in an instant when she was forced out of bed, viciously attacked and left for dead, her face mutilated beyond recognition. Her attacker: her 35-year-old husband, who did it because he was convinced his wife was having an affair.

As awful as this incident sounds, it's even worse when you consider that it's not uncommon. Parveen lives in Pakistan, a country where such attacks on women—known as honor violence—take place too often. There's a saying in Pakistan that honor is like a person's nose. “If a person dishonors you, they say that person has cut off your nose,” explains Riffat Hassan, Ph.D., a Pakistani-born Islamic theologian who teaches at the University of Louisville in Kentucky. “It's a metaphor, but in Pakistan people actually do it.” Parveen is living proof of that. Today, with her husband in jail in Pakistan, Parveen agreed to give *Glamour* an exclusive interview and retell her tragic tale.

Tragedy and triumph—the two faces of Zahida Parveen: (right) the scars from her husband's brutal attack; (above) her new face, with the prosthetics that have rebuilt her confidence.



■ AN ATTACK WITH NO WARNING

Recuperating from her reconstructive surgery, Parveen sits curled up on a leather chair in the suburban Maryland home of Nasim Ashraf, M.D., the kidney specialist and Pakistani expatriate who arranged for Parveen to have her face reconstructed. Shakir, Parveen's younger brother, is perched protectively beside her.

Parveen looks like a child. At just 4'11", her 78-pound frame practically disappears beneath her black floral shalwar kameez, the billowy pants and ankle-length dress that is Pakistan's national dress. A black-and-white-checked scarf is wrapped loosely around her head, and every so often it slips down to reveal the wavy black hair covering the severed lobes that were once ears. Her prosthetic eyes are just a week old, the two brown-pupiled glass globes held tentatively in place by a few thin strips of surgical tape affixed to the outer lids. A gauze pad is taped to the bridge of what was once her nose, now a gnarled mass of scar tissue marked by two jagged holes.

Aseela Ashraf, Dr. Ashraf's wife, arrives and pats Parveen gently on her bony back before sitting down. The two women have become

TOP: CHRISTOPHER BROWN/CORBIS SABA

close, and Parveen now has two people she trusts to translate and fill in details that are too painful for her to talk about.

Parveen's first arranged marriage took place when she was about 16, which is common in Pakistan. Luckily, Parveen liked her first husband. "We had a very good time together," she says. "He was a decent person." But it took many frustrating years of trying before she became pregnant. "When I found out I was with child, I was so happy. Then my husband died of a heart attack before our son was born," she remembers matter-of-factly, as if tragedy is an accepted fact of her life.

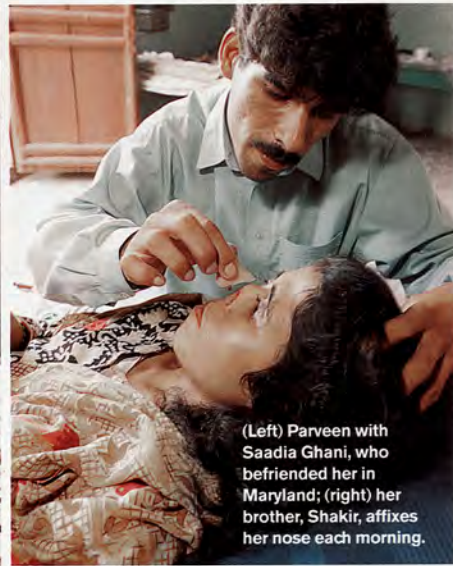
Parveen moved back in with her mother to deliver the child. At first, she didn't want to remarry. But soon, a local matchmaker approached Parveen's family about Mehmood Iqbal, a barber living in a nearby village. "I was excited to meet him," Parveen says, shrugging her tiny shoulders. She married him, taking her one-year-old son to live with her new husband, and three years later, she gave birth to a daughter. "My husband was fine the first four years of our marriage," Parveen insists. "If there was something wrong with him, I would not have stayed." The one thing that struck her was that Iqbal was unusually quiet. "He would only sit and listen," she recalls, as if that might explain why he came undone. But when asked why she thought her husband went on to commit such a heinous act, Parveen answers, "It was the devil."

Actually, honor killings are part of the fabric of Pakistani married life. "Once a woman is married, it's culturally believed that she belongs to her husband and is supposed to be obedient—her behavior reflects on him," explains Sheila Dauer, director of Amnesty International USA's Women's Human Rights Program. Though honor violence takes place in other predominantly Islamic countries—including Jordan, Egypt and Turkey—Pakistan has received the most attention for these crimes. More than 850 women in Punjab (a Pakistani region) were victims of honor killings in 1998 and 1999 alone, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Amnesty International estimates that many more cases go unreported. Honor violence comes in many forms: Women have been shot, burned, strangled and mutilated with razors, axes and knives. The causes vary as well, from having affairs to asking for a divorce to talking to a man who's not a family member.

■ **LEFT FOR DEAD**

Parveen, however, says she had no inkling that her husband was jealous. And yet, on the night of December 20, 1998, he woke her and ordered her into the common room of their three-room home in Sukho, a rural village about an hour north of Islamabad, Pakistan's capital. There, Parveen, who was then three months pregnant with Iqbal's second child (but still weighed less than 100 pounds), saw a rope hanging from the rafters. Iqbal, a stocky man, ordered Parveen to lock the bedroom door, but she refused, worrying that the children might wake up and call for her. "The kids are dead to you," he said. "You are no longer their mother."

Holding her captive, Iqbal accused Parveen of having an affair.



(Left) Parveen with Saadia Ghani, who befriended her in Maryland; (right) her brother, Shakir, affixes her nose each morning.

“He used a metal rod to poke out my eyes.”

Parveen insisted that she had never been unfaithful to him, but Iqbal didn't listen. Instead, he gagged her, bound her feet and hands and hung her upside down from the ceiling. As he beat her with a wooden ax handle, blood began to drip from her arms and legs. Then Iqbal, a barber by profession, traded his ax for a razor. He cut off the lower lobes of her ears, then sliced her nose at the base. "He tried to cut out my tongue," Parveen says, "but I kept wiggling it, so he never got a firm hold." Parveen remained conscious and, tragically, is able to remember every moment of the torture. "He next used a metal rod to poke out my eyes," she continues, "and then put his finger inside [each socket] to make sure nothing was left." Parveen hooks her skinny index finger in the air, makes a half-circle motion for effect and then holds her head with both hands as if the memory hurts. When Iqbal finished mutilating her, he cut the rope, causing Parveen to fall to the floor like a limp rag doll. "He left me for dead," Parveen says, "and then he took our daughter and left." Parveen crawled across the floor, found a blanket, wrapped it around herself and passed out.

When she came to the next morning, she heard her son crying. Realizing he was locked in the bedroom, Parveen began to shout for help. Two neighbors quickly arrived and, seeing the bloody mess, sent for the police. "They saw everything," Parveen explains. "The blood, the rope. And I gave them a full statement." The worst moment, however, was when Parveen's son saw his mother's body caked in blood, her face mutilated and oozing. He crouched in the corner and began to wail. There was nothing she could do to comfort him.

That morning, Parveen's son went to stay with her mother, and Parveen was eventually taken to a government hospital. Her story was published in two local newspapers, prompting Tehmina Daultana, then the Minister for Social Welfare, Women Development and Special Education, to visit Parveen in the hospital. Parveen credits Daultana with Iqbal's arrest, a rare occurrence given that few men who engage in honor violence are ever punished. "She threatened the police station," Parveen explains. "She said, 'If you don't find him and put him in jail, I'll have you all fired.'" Several days later, Iqbal was arrested at his sister's home and incarcerated without bail, and Parveen's daughter went to live with Parveen's mother and son. When Parveen heard the news, she was happy for the first time since the horrific incident. But that moment was fleeting.

■ **“WILL I GET MY SIGHT BACK?”**

The first few months in the hospital were difficult. Parveen had to wait for the cuts on her tongue to heal before she could eat solid

RIGHT: CHRISTOPHER BROWN/CORBIS SABA

Help Stop Honor Violence



Parveen at home with her daughter Madiha

TWO YEARS AGO, RIFFAT HASSAN,

Ph.D., a professor of religious studies and humanities at the University of Louisville, appeared on ABC's *Nightline*, answering questions raised by the show's broadcast of a documentary called *A Matter of Honor*. The film revealed the prevalence of honor violence against women in Hassan's native Pakistan. Within two days, Hassan received so many phone calls, faxes and e-mails from people who wanted to help that she founded the International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan (INRFVVP). "My personal mission is to educate Muslim women about their rights," says Hassan, "because if you don't know what your rights are, you are not in a

position to enforce them." Among other things, the INRFVVP works to:

- **Lobby Pakistani leaders to create stricter laws** and harsher punishments for perpetrators of honor violence.
- **Raise money to provide medical care for honor-violence survivors.** To date, the foundation has raised more than \$20,000 to help women who were attacked get medical and legal aid, and plans to find funding for mobile burn units to treat victims.

For more information about INRFVVP or to make a donation, call 502-637-4090 or log on to the Web site at inrfvvp.org.

food, and her mutilated face throbbed with pain. The Crisis Centre—an organization that offers medical, legal and psychological counsel to abused women—added her to its long list of tragic clients in need of help. One of the many ways the Crisis Centre helps rehabilitate these women is by financing reconstructive surgery. The Centre made arrangements for Parveen to get a new nose, but when she found out she wouldn't get her sight back, Parveen refused the operation. "What's the point of any surgery if I will never be able to see my children again?" she lamented.

Parveen has never seen her youngest daughter, whom she gave birth to in the hospital in July 1999. After seven months in the hospital, Parveen finally left to live with her mother and children. Although she was happy to be home, it was a rude awakening. Her face resembled a ghoulish mask. "Her daughter was afraid of her, and that really hurt Zahida," Aseela Ashraf explains. "She told me that her daughter refused to sleep with her." Parveen's son, who was seven, was more understanding, but he would often come home in tears after other children teased him about his mother's condition.

"It broke her heart," Dr. Ashraf explains. Though Parveen rarely ventured outside, when she did, she often overheard people wondering aloud what she had done to deserve the way she looked.

■ **AN ACT OF BRAVERY**

More than a year after the attack, Parveen's case went to trial. Parveen went to court only to testify, concealing her face with dark glasses and a scarf wrapped around her head. On the witness stand, Parveen told her story. "She was very brave," remembers Nahida Mahboob Elahi, a volunteer lawyer for the Crisis Centre who headed Parveen's case. "You should have seen the look of surprise on her husband's face. I don't think he realized she'd have enough courage to come forward." Iqbal maintained his innocence throughout, claiming he was forced to act as he did to save his honor. Parveen wasn't present for his testimony, but she recalls, "I did hear his voice in the crowd one day. Every time I remember that moment, I shiver."

On July 21, 2000, Mehmood Iqbal was convicted of attempted murder. "He got five years for attempt to kill, three years for cutting off her nose, three years for gouging out her eyes, one and a half years for her ears and one and a half years for cutting her tongue," Elahi explains. "All of the offenses run consecutively, which adds up to 14 years." Though 14 years sounds like a slap on the wrist considering the crime, in Pakistan it's considered a life sentence, explains Dr. Ashraf, as life spans are shorter and prison conditions harsher than in the United States. In addition to jail time, Iqbal was fined for each of Parveen's mutilated body parts—a total of 1,090,000 rupees, or approximately \$17,000.

Amnesty International USA's Dauer is amazed that Iqbal wound up in prison at all. "There are so many cases where men aren't indicted, let alone convicted and put in jail," she says. Cris Toffolo, Ph.D., Amnesty International USA's consultant on Pakistan, adds these startling statistics: "The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reviewed

newspapers in Lahore [a city in Pakistan] in 1997 and discovered that in 215 local homicidal burn cases—most of them likely the result of domestic violence—only six people were arrested. No one was convicted. In 1998, 183 women died of burn injuries in Punjab. Only three people were arrested." Still, there's hope. General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's military leader, assumed power in 1999 and vowed to eradicate honor violence. Dauer would like Musharraf's words translated into legislation: "The government [must] criminalize honor killings as murder."

■ **THE ROAD TO RECOVERY**

Dr. Ashraf first read about Parveen in *The Washington Post* on May 8, 2000, and called the journalist to see how he could help. "I wanted to do something to right this horrific wrong," Dr. Ashraf explains. "I also wanted to show the world that this barbaric behavior is not tolerated by Pakistanis." To that end, Dr. Ashraf traveled to Pakistan in July 2000 to meet Parveen. She was living with her three children, her mother, her brother, his wife (continued on page 312)

CHRISTOPHER BROWN/CORBIS SYGMA

and their three children—all on Shakir's meager barber's salary. Despite having read the account of the attack, Dr. Ashraf was shocked to see how badly mutilated Parveen was. Her eyelids had atrophied and literally attached themselves to the sunken curve of her empty sockets. "It's incredible," he insists, "that she survived."

When Dr. Ashraf asked Parveen to come to the United States for surgery, her first question was, "Will I be able to see?" "Of course, the answer was no," says Dr. Ashraf, "but I told her it would help her children tremendously psychologically." Still, she was hesitant. "I didn't want to go alone," explains Parveen. But she finally agreed when Dr. Ashraf arranged for Shakir to accompany her to Maryland. "She did it for her children," Aseela Ashraf is convinced. "She said there were many times when she wanted to die, but she worried about who would take care of the children."

Parveen arrived in Maryland on January 7, 2001, depressed and socially paralyzed. "Those first few weeks were very difficult," Aseela Ashraf explains. "Zahida did not say much. She was homesick, and at first she had a hard time sleeping." Parveen agreed to come for only six months, a timetable that limited Craig Dufresne, M.D., the chief of plastic surgery at Fairfax Hospital who had agreed to do Parveen's surgery for free. Rather than give her a new nose and earlobes, which would have taken several surgeries and up to a year and a half of rehabilitation, Dr. Dufresne decided to use prosthetics.

The operation, which took place on January 17, lasted six hours. When the surgery was finished, Parveen had grooves in her skin where the prosthetics would slide in. It took several weeks for the swelling to go down before other prosthetic specialists could mold her new ears, eyes and a nose. But slowly, Aseela Ashraf saw a shift in Parveen's attitude, not to mention her appetite. "She gained 11 pounds while she was here," Aseela Ashraf says with a smile. "What a transformation!"

But each week when she called her family—her mother and children would take the calls at their cousin's house, which had a phone—she would sink back into depression. "Zahida missed her children terribly and needed to get back to them," explains Aseela Ashraf. After only four months, Parveen asked if she could go home.

Trying to fulfill her wish, the doctors worked at full speed. Aseela Ashraf points to the day that Parveen got her new nose as pivotal in her recovery. "I almost started crying when they put it on her," Aseela Ashraf remembers. "She asked me, 'How do I look?'

I told her she looked beautiful. You cannot imagine the smile on her face."

On May 7, five months after arriving in the United States, Parveen arrived back in Pakistan to a throng of local reporters. "She was in all the newspapers," says Aseela Ashraf, who spoke to Parveen a week after her return. "She told me she came out of the airport pushing her luggage on a cart and gave interviews to all of the journalists." But the greatest thrill for Parveen was her children's reaction to her new face. "She was so happy," Aseela Ashraf recalls. "She said, 'My daughter brought me a comb and asked me to comb her hair.' That was the same daughter who would not sleep with her."

■ WHEN WILL IT END?

Though Parveen's case has placed honor killings on Pakistan's political front burners, Nahida Elahi, Parveen's lawyer, is worried that paying so much attention to one woman's case deflects attention from those of the thousands of others in need. "I'm happy for Zahida," Elahi explains, "but we need to take preventive measures to help other victims." Riffat Hassan, who founded the International Network for the Rights of Female Victims of Violence in Pakistan, a nonprofit organization that educates people about human rights in Islamic countries, agrees that men must begin to see that women are their equals, and women must understand their basic rights. "You have to deconstruct the negative attitudes toward women that make honor violence possible," she says. "Some women actually believe that if an honor attack happens, it's the woman's fault," Hassan laments.

Still, Parveen's case is hopeful proof that Pakistan's views on honor violence are shifting. She's also proof of the human spirit's resilience. Dr. and Aseela Ashraf visited Parveen in her village in June, and neither could get over her transformation. "Previously," Dr. Ashraf says, "she had no self-esteem and thought she was less than human. Now the entire village comes to visit!" If it was Iqbal's intent to shame Parveen along with brutally disfiguring her, he failed miserably. Astoundingly, since hearing of her return, he has, according to Parveen, sent her messages looking to reconcile. She plans to respond to her husband's pleas with divorce papers as soon as they are in order. In the meantime, she wants to move forward. "It's more important that my suffering saves other women from this sort of thing in the future," she says. "Every time I hear about the birth of a female child, I worry about the powers working against her." She pauses a moment, then adds, "But at the same time, I know women can face anything. They have the strength." ©