

Khalida Brohi

Teaching women in Pakistan music, embroidery, and—most of all—strength



In Balochistan,

a rural province in Pakistan near the borders of Iran and Afghanistan, a young girl was entered into an arranged marriage at the age of 9. She had never entered a school, yet she was considered ready to enter wedlock. This was not unusual for the region—what was unusual was that her husband ran away to college after the ceremony. There the young man realized that he could never be happy with an uneducated wife. Instead of proposing to one of the educated women at his school, however, the man's thoughts turned to the girl waiting for him in his village. And so the young man went home, bought his wife her own schoolbooks, and taught her to read. Somewhere during those lessons, they fell in love.

This is not a fairytale, although it is extraordinary. This is the story of Khalida Brohi's parents, and it does much to explain her courage and determination to challenge tradition. Brohi was the first girl in her village to go away for school, because her mother insisted that her children be educated. With her father's encouragement, she went to school in Karachi, the largest city in the country.

Becoming Sughar

In 2004, Brohi returned to her village after attending classes in Karachi to discover that one of her friends had been murdered in an honor killing for wanting to choose her own husband. Khalida became a passionate activist, speaking out against honor killings and promoting women's education. In her fury she denounced the traditions of her village and offended those who practiced them. Strong backlash from tribal elders forced her to flee back to the city.

Brohi realized that she needed a new approach. By working with the community to enact change, she could turn her enemies into allies. She convinced the village elders to let her open a women's center by emphasizing a curriculum of feminine arts—music, singing, embroidery—and by promising an income for the women. In the poverty stricken region, finances won the day.

Women in the center are paid 45 rupees an hour for their embroidery. While at work, they also learn about gender equality, domestic violence prevention, and receive a basic education. A woman in Brohi's village used to be isolated, confined to her husband's or father's house; now she is a part of a community of women. And with community comes strength.



Sughar models take the runway

Into the Spotlight

Khalida’s one-village experiment is now the Sughar Empowerment Society—an organization supporting 23 women’s resources centers across rural Pakistan and over 800 women. Khalida, as the founder and executive director of the foundation, chose the name Sughar because it means “skilled and confident woman.” It is also the name of the fashion brand under which the tribal embroidery is sold. Handbags, dresses, pillows, and shoes designed in rural Pakistan now grace the capital’s runways, creating incomes for the nation’s marginalized women. After an 8 month course with Sughar, women are offered a loan to begin their own businesses. For many, the economic empowerment is life changing.

Brohi reaches out to educate men as well, because she believes that they are an integral part of the solution to gender inequality. Sughar organ-

izes not only women’s centers, but cricket matches, which are wildly popular among Pakistani men. During the games, announcers discuss women’s rights, and how Islam actually supports the education of both women and men.

At 24, Khalida has already received international acclaim. She has been named one of *Newsweek* magazine’s 25 under 25; one of the “100 Women Who Matter in Pakistan” by *Newsweek*; awarded the “Woman of Impact Award” by the Women in the World Foundation; the Women Excellence Award by the national government of Pakistan; the Young Champion Award from the University of Singapore; and the Unreasonable Institute Fellowship Award.

Brohi has received recognition from Oprah Winfrey and the former American President Bill Clinton. She has also been a target of less positive attention—like her friend and fellow

“Doing this work will keep me alive. Not doing it will kill me.”

—Khalida Brohi—

activist Malala, Khalida has been threatened with violence by those who oppose her efforts. Some are just threats, but too many are real. Her office has been bombed, but she refuses to give up. As she once told her father, “doing this work will keep me alive. Not doing it will kill me.”

Her next goal? Change the lives of one million women in the next ten years. Because although the word “sughar” denotes a very rare woman, Khalida and her team believe that given the opportunity, all women can be skilled and confident.

1. As of 2011, only 1 in 3 women in Balochistan were literate. Imagine your life if you could not read. How would illiteracy affect your independence? Think about your career, your ability to travel, your ability to vote.
2. Many women in villages like Khalida’s are not allowed to leave their homes. As a result, they rarely have friends or other women to talk to. How does this isolation prevent women from challenging gender inequality and violence?

“When it comes to our honor, the only answer is a bullet”

What is an Honor Killing?

When Khalida Brohi first asked village elders to let their daughters and wives attend a women’s center, the idea was inconceivable. Women who leave the house become independent, the elders explained, and an independent girl is a threat to a man’s honor. “When it comes to our honor,” one man said, “the only answer is a bullet.” Even when it’s not the girl’s fault.

Honor killings are not associated with particular *religions*, but they are associated with certain *cultures*—especially those cultures that practice patriarchy and family honor norms. In these groups, a woman’s behavior is linked to the entire family’s reputation. If the males in the family fail to control her actions or fail to protect her, the family’s honor is threatened or tarnished. In an honor killing, a male relative kills her in order to restore the family’s honor.

A woman may be killed by her family in an honor crime for a number of reasons. She may have committed adultery, refused an arranged marriage, been sexually assaulted, acted too “Western,” or flirted with a man. She may have

done none of these things. Suspicion is enough to justify honor killings in some families. For example, five Pakistani women were killed in 2012 after they were filmed on a cellphone clapping and singing in the company of two boys. Honor killings can target men too—last year a Pakistani man and his wife were both killed after marrying without their families’ consent.

Historically, many honor killings have been public affairs, in order to send a message to the community: First, that the men of the family had regained their honor and their power. Second, that other women should be reminded of their proper place. In a rapidly modernizing world, however, such public criminal displays are more likely to gain the attention of the authorities. As a result, honor killings have increasingly been disguised as accidents and suicides.

Honor killings remain underreported and undocumented, so it is hard to uncover just how prevalent they are. The United Nations Population Fund estimates that 5,000 women are killed in honor crimes each year. Even when these crimes are correctly identified and reported, the perpetrators often receive reduced sentences. Local courts look the other way when honor is involved. Frequently teenagers are chosen by the family to commit the murder, because as minors their sentences, if charged at all, will be shorter.



Last year a group of men attacked Rukhsana Bibi and her husband while they slept. The couple eloped after Bibi’s parents tried to force her into an arranged marriage with another man. With seven bullets in her body, Bibi survived—and she is trying to bring her husband’s killers to justice.

With thanks to the following organizations for resources used:

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Resource Guide



HUFF POST IMPACT



[“Fighting Honor Killings in Pakistan with Fashion”](#)

By Betty Londergan

A new fashion line is taking Pakistan by storm—but its creator, Khalida Brohi, has more in mind than profits and embroidery. At women’s centers in rural Pakistan, workers for Sughar gain both an income and an education about their rights.

[The Next Generation of Malalas](#)

In these videos of the 2013 Women in the World Summit, Christiane Amanpour speaks with Khalida Brohi about her efforts to empower women in Pakistan. The key, Khalida says, is finding ways to work with the traditional village elders—not against them.



[Outlawed in Pakistan](#)

This PBS documentary follows the struggle of a young woman trying to gain justice through the Pakistani courts. As an eight-grader she was kidnapped and raped by four men—she escaped, only to find that the village council told her family to kill her. At first, the police agreed. Her family defied tradition to protect her.



Learning Squared Infographic—[USAID](#)

This infographic from USAID provides statistics and visuals on how educating girls can brighten not only their futures, but the world's, by reducing child mortality, raising agricultural yields, and more.

[Khalida Brohi: From Balochistan to MIT](#)

This blog post from Ethan Zuckerman, director of the Center for Civic Media at MIT, provides good biographical information about Khalida's life and future goals.

