

How I Work To Protect Women From Honor Killings

by Khalida Brohi

0:11 While preparing for my talk I was reflecting on my life and trying to figure out where exactly was that moment when my journey began. A long time passed by, and I simply couldn't figure out the beginning or the middle or the end of my story. I always used to think that my beginning was one afternoon in my community when my mother had told me that I had escaped three arranged marriages by the time I was two. Or one evening when electricity had failed for eight hours in our community, and my dad sat, surrounded by all of us, telling us stories of when he was a little kid struggling to go to school while his father, who was a farmer, wanted him to work in the fields with him. Or that dark night when I was 16 when three little kids had come to me and they whispered in my ear that my friend was murdered in something called the honor killings.

1:07 But then I realized that, as much as I know that these moments have contributed on my journey, they have influenced my journey but they have not been the beginning of it, but the true beginning of my journey was in front of a mud house in upper Sindh of Pakistan, where my father held the hand of my 14-year-old mother and they decided to walk out of the village to go to a town where they could send their kids to school. In a way, I feel like my life is kind of a result of some wise choices and decisions they've made.

1:39 And just like that, another of their decisions was to keep me and my siblings connected to our roots. While we were living in a community I fondly remember as called Ribabad, which means community of the poor, my dad made sure that we also had a house in our rural homeland. I come from an indigenous tribe in the mountains of Balochistan called Brahui. Brahui, or Brohi, means mountain dweller, and it is also my language. Thanks to my father's very strict rules about connecting to our customs, I had to live a beautiful life of songs, cultures, traditions, stories, mountains, and a lot of sheep. But then, living in two extremes between the traditions of my culture, of my village, and then modern education in my school wasn't easy. I was aware that I was the only girl who got to have such freedom, and I was guilty of it. While going to school in Karachi and Hyderabad, a lot of my cousins and childhood friends were getting married off, some to older men, some in exchange, some even as second wives. I got to see the beautiful tradition and its magic fade in front of me when I saw that the birth of a girl child was celebrated with sadness, when women were told to have patience as their main virtue.

3:03 Up until I was 16, I healed my sadness by crying, mostly at nights when everyone

would sleep and I would sob in my pillow, until that one night when I found out my friend was killed in the name of honor.

3:19 Honor killings is a custom where men and women are suspected of having relationships before or outside of the marriage, and they're killed by their family for it. Usually the killer is the brother or father or the uncle in the family. The U.N. reports there are about 1,000 honor murders every year in Pakistan, and these are only the reported cases.

3:40 A custom that kills did not make any sense to me, and I knew I had to do something about it this time. I was not going to cry myself to sleep. I was going to do something, anything, to stop it. I was 16 -- I started writing poetry and going door to door telling everybody about honor killings and why it happens, why it should be stopped, and raising awareness about it until I actually found a much, much better way to handle this issue.

4:05 In those days, we were living in a very small, one-roomed house in Karachi. Every year, during the monsoon seasons, our house would flood up with water -- rainwater and sewage -- and my mom and dad would be taking the water out. In those days, my dad brought home a huge machine, a computer. It was so big it looked as if it was going to take up half of the only room we had, and had so many pieces and wires that needed to be connected. But it was still the most exciting thing that has ever happened to me and my sisters. My oldest brother Ali got to be in charge of taking care of the computer, and all of us were given 10 to 15 minutes every day to use it. Being the oldest of eight kids, I got to use it the last, and that was after I had washed the dishes, cleaned the house, made dinner with my mom, and put blankets on the floor for everyone to sleep, and after that, I would run to the computer, connect it to the Internet, and have pure joy and wonder for 10 to 15 minutes.

5:11 In those days, I had discovered a website called Joogle. [Google] (Laughter) In my frantic wish to do something about this custom, I made use of Google and discovered Facebook, a website where people can connect to anyone around the world, and so, from my very tiny, cement-roofed room in Karachi, I connected with people in the U.K., the U.S., Australia and Canada, and created a campaign called WAKE UP Campaign against Honor Killings. It became enormous in just a few months. I got a lot of support from all around the world. Media was connecting to us. A lot of people were reaching out trying to raise awareness with us. It became so big that it went from online to the streets of my hometown, where we would do rallies and strikes trying to change the policies in Pakistan for women's support. And while I thought everything was perfect, my team -- which was basically my friends and neighbors at that time -- thought everything was going so well, we had no idea a big opposition was coming to us.

6:19 My community stood up against us, saying we were spreading un-Islamic behavior. We were challenging centuries-old customs in those communities. I remember my father receiving anonymous letters saying, "Your daughter is spreading Western culture in the honorable societies." Our car was stoned at one point. One day I went to the office and found our metal signboard wrinkled and broken as if a lot of people had been hitting it with something heavy. Things got so bad that I had to hide myself in many ways. I would put up the windows of the car, veil my face, not speak while I was in public, but eventually situations got worse when my life was threatened, and I had to leave, back to Karachi, and our actions stopped.

7:08 Back in Karachi, as an 18-year-old, I thought this was the biggest failure of my

entire life. I was devastated. As a teenager, I was blaming myself for everything that happened. And it turns out, when we started reflecting, we did realize that it was actually me and my team's fault.

7:30 There were two big reasons why our campaign had failed big time. One of those, the first reason, is we were standing against core values of people. We were saying no to something that was very important to them, challenging their code of honor, and hurting them deeply in the process. And number two, which was very important for me to learn, and amazing, and surprising for me to learn, was that we were not including the true heroes who should be fighting for themselves. The women in the villages had no idea we were fighting for them in the streets. Every time I would go back, I would find my cousins and friends with scarves on their faces, and I would ask, "What happened?" And they'd be like, "Our husbands beat us." But we are working in the streets for you! We are changing the policies. How is that not impacting their life?

8:20 So then we found out something which was very amazing for us. The policies of a country do not necessarily always affect the tribal and rural communities. It was devastating -- like, oh, we can't actually do something about this? And we found out there's a huge gap when it comes to official policies and the real truth on the ground.

8:43 So this time, we were like, we are going to do something different. We are going to use strategy, and we are going to go back and apologize. Yes, apologize. We went back to the communities and we said we are very ashamed of what we did. We are here to apologize, and in fact, we are here to make it up to you. How do we do that? We are going to promote three of your main cultures. We know that it's music, language, and embroidery.

9:10 Nobody believed us. Nobody wanted to work with us. It took a lot of convincing and discussions with these communities until they agreed that we are going to promote their language by making a booklet of their stories, fables and old tales in the tribe, and we would promote their music by making a CD of the songs from the tribe, and some drumbeating. And the third, which was my favorite, was we would promote their embroidery by making a center in the village where women would come every day to make embroidery.

9:45 And so it began. We worked with one village, and we started our first center. It was a beautiful day. We started the center. Women were coming to make embroidery, and going through a life-changing process of education, learning about their rights, what Islam says about their rights, and enterprise development, how they can create money, and then how they can create money from money, how they can fight the customs that have been destroying their lives from so many centuries, because in Islam, in reality, women are supposed to be shoulder to shoulder with men. Women have so much status that we have not been hearing, that they have not been hearing, and we needed to tell them that they need to know where their rights are and how to take them by themselves, because they can do it and we can't.

10:33 So this was the model which actually came out -- very amazing. Through embroidery we were promoting their traditions. We went into the village. We would mobilize the community. We would make a center inside where 30 women will come for six months to learn about value addition of traditional embroidery, enterprise development, life skills and basic education, and about their rights and how to say no to those customs and how to stand as leaders for themselves and the society. After six

months, we would connect these women to loans and to markets where they can become local entrepreneurs in their communities.

11:07 We soon called this project Sughar. Sughar is a local word used in many, many languages in Pakistan. It means skilled and confident women. I truly believe, to create women leaders, there's only one thing you have to do: Just let them know that they have what it takes to be a leader. These women you see here, they have strong skills and potential to be leaders. All we had to do was remove the barriers that surrounded them, and that's what we decided to do.

11:39 But then while we were thinking everything was going well, once again everything was fantastic, we found our next setback: A lot of men started seeing the visible changes in their wife. She's speaking more, she's making decisions -- oh my gosh, she's handling everything in the house. They stopped them from coming to the centers, and this time, we were like, okay, time for strategy two. We went to the fashion industry in Pakistan and decided to do research about what happens there. Turns out the fashion industry in Pakistan is very strong and growing day by day, but there is less contribution from the tribal areas and to the tribal areas, especially women.

12:21 So we decided to launch our first ever tribal women's very own fashion brand, which is now called Nomads. And so women started earning more, they started contributing more financially to the house, and men had to think again before saying no to them when they were coming to the centers.

12:42 (Applause) Thank you, thank you.

12:47 In 2013, we launched our first Sughar Hub instead of a center. We partnered with TripAdvisor and created a cement hall in the middle of a village and invited so many other organizations to work over there. We created this platform for the nonprofits so they can touch and work on the other issues that Sughar is not working on, which would be an easy place for them to give trainings, use it as a farmer school, even as a marketplace, and anything they want to use it for, and they have been doing really amazingly. And so far, we have been able to support 900 women in 24 villages around Pakistan. (Applause)

13:32 But that's actually not what I want. My dream is to reach out to one million women in the next 10 years, and to make sure that happens, this year we launched Sughar Foundation in the U.S. It is not just going to fund Sughar but many other organizations in Pakistan to replicate the idea and to find even more innovative ways to unleash the rural women's potential in Pakistan.

14:00 Thank you so much.

14:02 (Applause) Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

14:10 Chris Anderson: Khalida, you are quite the force of nature. I mean, this story, in many ways, just seems beyond belief. It's incredible that someone so young could do achieve this much through so much force and ingenuity. So I guess one question: This is a spectacular dream to reach out and empower a million women -- how much of the current success depends on you, the force of this magnetic personality? How does it scale?

14:41 Khalida Brohi: I think my job is to give the inspiration out, give my dream out. I can't teach how to do it, because there are so many different ways. We have been

experimenting with three ways only. There are a hundred different ways to unleash potential in women. I would just give the inspiration and that's my job. I will keep doing it. Sughar will still be growing. We are planning to reach out to two more villages, and soon I believe we will be scaling out of Pakistan into South Asia and beyond.

15:11 CA: I love that when you talked about your team in the talk, I mean, you were all 18 at the time. What did this team look like? This was school friends, right?

15:20 KB: Do people here believe that I'm at an age where I'm supposed to be a grandmother in my village? My mom was married at nine, and I am the oldest woman not married and not doing anything in my life in my village.

15:37 CA: Wait, wait, wait, not doing anything?

15:41 KB: No.

CA: You're right.

15:43 KB: People feel sorry for me, a lot of times.

15:46 CA: But how much time are you spending now actually back in Balochistan?

KB: I live over there. We live between, still, Karachi and Balochistan. My siblings are all going to school. I am still the oldest of eight siblings.

16:00 CA: But what you're doing is definitely threatening to some people there. How do you handle safety? Do you feel safe? Are there issues there?

16:11 KB: This question has come to me a lot of times before, and I feel like the word "fear" just comes to me and then drops, but there is one fear that I have that is different from that. The fear is that if I get killed, what would happen to the people who love me so much? My mom waits for me till late at night that I should come home. My sisters want to learn so much from me, and there are many, many girls in my community who want to talk to me and ask me different things, and I recently got engaged. (Laughs) (Applause)

16:48 CA: Is he here? You've got to stand up. (Applause)

16:59 KB: Escaping arranged marriages, I chose my own husband across the world in L.A., a really different world. I had to fight for a whole year. That's totally a different story. But I think that's the only thing that I'm afraid of, and I don't want my mom to not see anyone when she waits in the night.

17:20 CA: So people who want to help you on their way, they can go on, they can maybe buy some of these clothes that you're bringing over that are actually made, the embroidery is done back in Balochistan?

17:32 KB: Yeah.

17:33 CA: Or they can get involved in the foundation.

17:35 KB: Definitely. We are looking for as many people as we can, because now that the foundation's in the beginning process, I am trying to learn a lot about how to operate, how to get funding or reach out to more organizations, and especially in the

e-commerce, which is very new for me. I mean, I am not a fashion person, believe me.

17:54 CA: Well, it's been incredible to have you here. Please go on being courageous, go on being smart, and please stay safe.

18:02 KB: Thank you so much.

CA: Thank you, Khalida. (Applause)