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Women

Pakistan's history of rape impunity

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Violence against women won't end until the country's elites are held accountable. The alleged gang rape of a 15-year-old girl by a group of men in Lahore, Pakistan, made national headlines in the first week of January — not least because one of the accused men is a [member of the youth wing of the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz](#), the political party ruling the country.

The Friday Times, one of the more prominent English language weeklies, covered the rape in its gossip column, dismissing the charges as a fabrication by the victim's family. The column, which [claimed](#) DNA tests could prove sexual contact between the victim and the main perpetrator was consensual rather than forced, was received poorly on Pakistani social media and was later deleted from the newspaper's website. It was then reported that the victim, feeling pressure amid the police probe, attempted suicide by jumping off a balcony at her house.

In an editorial, Pakistan's Dawn newspaper [wrote](#) that "the rape has drawn the usual reactions." And to a large extent, this is true. There are countless cases of rape victims committing suicide after losing hope for justice in Pakistan; there are just as many cases of people, mostly men, in positions of religious or political privilege indulging in victim blaming. In 2005, Pakistan's then-President Pervez Musharraf told [The Washington Post](#), "If you want to go abroad and get a visa for Canada or citizenship and be a millionaire, get yourself raped," implying that Pakistani women were using being sexually assaulted as a means to get rich and obtain asylum in a Western country.

Rape is a violent act used to exert power and control, and it occurs everywhere. However, there are certain environments where this form of violence thrives: patriarchal societies with flawed justice systems that have set precedents of brushing sexual violence under the rug. What's more, the notion of personal and family honor, which is fastidiously attached to the female body, is stronger in Pakistan than in some other parts of the world. This urges victims and their families to cover up sexual assaults and creates an incentive to use rape as revenge and punishment.

Pakistan is choosing to protect a politician over a 15-year-old rape victim.

Pakistan's political history is full of unpunished sexual violence. During the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, [approximately](#) 100,000 women were raped. Pakistani history books erased the fact that Hindu and Sikh women were raped, and Indian history books ignored that Muslim women were raped. In 1971 scores of war crimes were committed in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) by members of the Pakistani army and pro-Pakistani militias. Thousands of Bengali women were abducted, kept in barracks described as [rape camps](#) and repeatedly assaulted. By choosing not to acknowledge that hordes of Pakistanis committed sexual crimes against women and by leaving them unpunished, Pakistan set a destructive precedent.

These sexual assault atrocities are often waved off by journalists and government officials with the strange explanation that rape was not the only crime that occurred in 1971. After 45 years, [a tribunal to prosecute those responsible for these war crimes](#) has been assembled in Bangladesh. But there are serious problems with the manner in which the tribunals are being run, one of which is that the tribunal has no power to prosecute Pakistani soldiers. In 1971 and in the 1974 Delhi Tripartite Agreement, the Pakistani government chose its soldiers and commanders over the thousands of rape victims, and today Pakistan is choosing to protect a politician over the 15-year-old rape victim. Decisions that were made in the 1970s on the level of the state are reflected in the way Pakistani society has [trivialized justice](#).

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In November [the Pakistani Foreign Affairs Ministry](#) wrote that the 1974 agreement “calls for a forward-looking approach in matters relating to 1971” to foster better relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh. This outlook implies that Bengali rape victims should just let bygones be bygones for the sake of regional peace. Perhaps Pakistan thought 45 years is long enough and wounds have healed themselves.

Pakistan has only to glance at the recent talks between South Korea and Japan to realize that the mere passage of time does not erase the scars of sexual violence. Last month the Korean “comfort women” — a euphemism for women whom the Japanese used as sex slaves during World War II — received [an apology and a financial compensation of \\$8.3 million](#), more than 70 years after the crimes were committed. In all probability, it was not historical guilt that caused Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to offer the apology but his desire to improve ties with South Korea and soften his nationalist image. Realpolitik aside, Japan has set an example that should affect the way Pakistan thinks about 1971 as well as every other rape in the country that goes unpunished.

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[Al-Jazeera America](#)