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Raheel Raza: Speaking out for Muslim women's rights



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Raheel Raza has been outspoken ever since she was a little girl growing up in Pakistan. Today, the award-winning journalist, author of *Their Jihad, Not my Jihad* and president of The Council for Muslims Facing Tomorrow is especially vocal about fighting women's rights abuses, particularly forced and underage marriage, honour killings and female genital mutilation (FGM) – all happening not only in Muslim countries, but right here in Canada.

Though Raza, a Sunni, has been tackling these issues since moving to Toronto in 1989 with her Shiite husband and two young sons, it wasn't until last year's release of the documentary *Honor Diaries* that she's finally seeing real change. The film, produced by Paula Kweskin of the Clarion Project, features Raza and other women's rights advocates as they engage in dialogue about gender inequality. Following public and private screenings around the world, *Honor Diaries* has taken on a life of its own and created what Raza calls "a movement."

On Nov. 19 and 20, the *Honor Diaries* team and the Global Women's Institute are hosting the first-ever Censored Women's Film Festival at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Four powerful documentaries will be screened, with filmmakers, experts and activists like Raza leading discussions. *The CJN* spoke to Raza, 65, before the festival.

What was life like growing up in Pakistan?

I grew up in a middle-class, moderate Muslim family. My father was in the army, my mother was a teacher. We grew up with Islam, but nothing was thrust down our throats, no extremism of any sort. I did my entire schooling in convent colleges run by Irish Catholic nuns. But in 1977, General Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq came to power and was very influenced by the Wahhabi/Salafi ideology from Saudi Arabia. That's when we saw the beginning of religious extremism that later morphed into violent extremism. My husband and I married that year, and soon after, left for Dubai. We both had rebellious natures and activist streaks of questioning the status quo. It wasn't kosher for a Muslim girl to ask questions, to ask why. I was always questioning and always in trouble.

What prompted you to get so passionate about championing human rights, particularly underage marriages, honour killings and FGM?

I grew up in a culture where women were supposed to be seen and not heard. Although I didn't see any direct abuse in my family, the honour culture permeated. It was all about, "Be careful what you say and do because you can dishonour the family." When I came to Canada, I found my voice, I found my freedom. All of these barbaric practices are happening here under the radar. They're hard to track and they're difficult to report. For instance, FGM has not been tracked in terms of statistics in Canada, but we know it exists. In the U.S., close to half a million women are at risk of FGM or have had it. In Canada, there have been 23 honour killings reported as such since 1999. When it starts happening here to young innocent girls, it's absolutely frightening.

With migrants from Syria and Africa making their way to Europe and North America, should we be concerned that they will bring their tribal practices with them?

Yes, it is a worry, but it shouldn't sideline our compassion for the humanitarian cause. It's a very fine line to walk. In the wave of Syrian refugees that have gone into Europe, not all of them are genuinely Syrians. Some of the bad apples will blend in with them, and with that, there's always worry about these practices. No matter what crisis strikes the world, it's always the women who suffer the most. Syrian girls are being bought and sold, there's rape and abuse, their lives are at risk. So yes, there's a worry for both the humanitarian cause as well as our own welfare.

You're in favour of a "barbaric cultural practices" hotline. How would it differ from traditional methods of reporting crimes, such as Crime Stoppers or 911?

Since *Honour Diaries* was released, I get an email or phone call almost once a week from some girl right here who is distressed. I'm not a social worker, I don't have the qualifications to give someone the legal help they need. It's not just domestic violence. This is specific. If a woman calls police and says, "I fear that my family will take me home for a visit and force me into a marriage," the police can't do anything because a criminal act has not been committed. We need to train our law enforcement agencies, our legal system. The action part is not over yet. There's still a long way to go.

How do we educate the next generation, particularly women at risk and the men who may exert power over them?

A lot of it is about how mothers bring up their sons. I'm the mother of two sons. They're young Muslim men. It's up to me to have taught them how to respect women. Young men who grow up in patriarchal cultures where they're not taught to respect women have great difficulty in dealing with these issues. It has to be at a grassroots level.

You have a fatwa on your head. How do you sleep at night knowing that people want to silence you?

There are a lot of people who'd rather see me shut up. I have a fatwa from a cleric in Saudi Arabia, I've had death threats, I have hate mail. But if it's all coming to me, then it's bothering them. They know it's happening. They know there are women who are speaking out. I'm very fortunate that I have the support of the men in my family. My sons used to stand as bodyguards while I spoke. They'd love to give me pepper spray and make sure that I can protect myself. But it's not something that I want to think about because if I do, then I can't do the work that I do. Backlash against me is a very small drop in the ocean of the work that has to be done. I just literally don't think about it.

What's the big deal with the niqab – if a woman wants to wear it, why should we care?

The niqab should be banned in Canada because it's symbolic of the Islamist political ideology. Look at which parts of the world support the niqab. I grew up in the Islamic state of Pakistan with no niqab; we just draped a scarf over our head. Niqab comes from Saudi, it's an Al Qaeda symbol, a Taliban symbol, it's ISIS, al-Nusra. It starts off with this very small minority pushing for these little accommodations and then it just goes on and on. This is only an addition to a series of unreasonable accommodations that we have seen the Canadian government giving in to. It's scary because this is how the sharia zones were established in the U.K. and Europe. All we have to do is look at what has happened there and take a lesson from it.

Some say the niqab issue and the plight of Syrian refugees are hints of a fifth column trying to turn Canada and the rest of the world into a caliphate. How do you feel about that?

The fifth column is already here. Where do most Muslims get their direction and instructions? Either the Muslim Brotherhood or Al Qaeda or Khomeinism. None of these are ideologies that are friendly to the West. The Muslim Brotherhood says clearly that the West is evil, go there, infiltrate, assimilate and then weaken them from inside. It's not a message of "respect your neighbour," "love your neighbour," "live and let live," "follow your faith." It's that you must impose your ideology, their version of Islam, and establish a caliphate wherever you go. For people like ISIS, there are no borders, no nation states, no boundaries. They believe the whole world is for them to invade and to implement their ideology. The sooner Westerners get their minds around this, they will be more alert to what's happening.

When will moderate Muslims rise up against the minority of violent Muslims?

Some don't speak out because they're influenced by these ideologies. The moderate Muslims don't care because they just want to go to work, educate their kids and have a good life. When my children were growing up, we told them that this is our country by choice, this is the country we have adopted, this is your land. But this is not the general message that's given. It's always "us and them." These are messages that come from the mosques, which are troubling. They're also saying, "Don't talk to Jews and Christians." When you hear that over and over again, it creates a mindset.

Are you optimistic at all about your grandchildren's future?

I don't expect to see change overnight, or even in my lifetime. But we're trying to sow the seeds of change through this documentary, through our actions, through our outreach, and hope that this change will take root. I don't know how many generations it will take to bring about change, but what we can do is empower and support those women, communities and organizations that are speaking out. My husband and I laugh that we're two retirees trying to fight the world on our pensions. But that doesn't stop us from speaking out. My kids sometimes say, "Why don't you just give up and become a full-time grandmother and not do this?" But it's my own conscience. I have to sleep at night knowing that I did my bit. That's all that matters.

This interview has been edited and condensed for style and clarity.