



Courtesy of the Rumana Monzur family

Mauled by Her Husband?

A Bangladeshi professor's husband allegedly gouged her eyes out when he suspected her of cheating. Asra Nomani on how the Muslim community rose to her defense in a game of 'shame jujitsu.'

by [Asra Q. Nomani](#) | July 16, 2011 7:37 PM EDT

The Daily Beast

The daughter of a retired Bangladeshi Army officer, Rumana Monzur, 33, was the image of a beautiful intellectual: wide eyes, angelic smile, and gentle disposition. While most of her aunts and uncles settled in the U.S. and Europe, landing in towns as far-flung as Bridgewater, N.J., she grew up in Bangladesh, marrying a childhood sweetheart in a “love marriage.” She became an assistant professor at Dhaka University in the country’s capital, and a year ago set out to earn a master's degree in political science as a Fulbright scholar at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. This past May, missing her husband and 5-year-old daughter, she returned to Dhaka to write her dissertation. Little did she know her world would soon turn dark, quite literally.

A Muslim, she completed her *asr*, or late-afternoon prayer, on Sunday, June 5, and returned to the computer in her parents' bedroom, her daughter drawing on the bed nearby. The door clicked, and in the next 10 harrowing minutes, Monzur’s husband, Syeed Hasan Sumon, brutally attacked her, she says. She had shown him photos on her Facebook page, and he flew into a rage, accusing her of an affair with an Iranian student in Canada.

Sumon, who is nearly blind from a degenerative disease, pulled his wife's hair, throwing her to the bed and pinning her arms down with his legs, she says. Then, in an account that is bone-chilling, she says her husband pressed his fingers into her eyes, gouging them out. According to Monzur, he gnawed at her cheek, lips, and nose, biting off bits of flesh, blood spilling throughout the room as Monzur flailed. Her daughter, Anusheh, stood in a corner of the room, screaming, as two household servants struggled to open the locked door. A neighbor took her to the hospital, where her parents soon arrived. The diagnosis: blindness. "I lost my eyes," says Monzur. "I don't want anyone to suffer like I am suffering. It is horrible."

In that part of the world, where shame so often defines the moral conscience of society and a family's honor lies so often in the image of a woman's chastity and fidelity, this could have been yet another tragic but untold story at the altar of *sharam*, or shame, as it's said in Urdu. For seven days, the story was mostly just a family secret, reported to the police but nowhere else. As Monzur marked her 33rd birthday blinded in the hospital, her father, Monzur Hossain, focused on her medical treatment, and her husband was free.

It seemed, at first, that Monzur's story would be a typical case of shame used as a strategy to silence a victim. But through social media, it has provided a window into a new phenomenon among Muslims and others around the world: addressing shame with shame. Nancy Snow, a professor of cross-cultural communications at California State University, Fullerton, calls it "shame jujitsu."

That Sunday, June 12, Monzur's former professor at Dhaka University, Amena Mohsin, 50, leaned over Monzur's bed on the sixth floor of a local hospital and talked to her gently about the importance of telling her story to the media. "I am speaking to you as a woman, as a human being," she said. "Rumana, please speak up." Monzur and her father understood the importance of what Mohsin was urging, but, the professor recalled, her father was afraid his daughter's character would be assassinated.

That night, Monzur's older first cousin, Rashed Maqsood, 43, returned to town from a business trip. He was 10 when Monzur was born and remembered her as a newborn. Now a bank executive in Bangladesh, he wasn't captive to tradition to keep silent. He urged Monzur's father to go to the media, as did an uncle of Monzur's living in the Netherlands. "Unless you go to the press, the police will not act quickly," the cousin told the father. Monzur's father was worried that "a lot of bad names" would be hurled at his daughter when the case became public, the cousin says. The husband would surely "do some nasty things" to defend himself. But the professor, uncle, and cousin prevailed.

That day, a [Facebook page](#) went up, fueled by colleagues and students of Monzur's at Dhaka University. The University of British Columbia, meanwhile, started collecting [online donations for Monzur's recovery](#).

The following day, local TV crews arrived at Monzur's hospital and, bandaged, she gave

a bedside interview, understandable only in Bangla, the language of Bangladesh, but eerie in any language. The first headlines began to circulate on Canadian and Bangladeshi websites. The next day, her story was on various broadcasts and [YouTube](#). A drumbeat of outrage started, reaching folks across the globe.

Even wild animals living in the jungle are more humane than this.

Two days later, Bangladeshi police arrested Monzur's husband, presenting him to the media handcuffed in jeans and a striped T shirt outside the police detectives' headquarters. According to a Bangladesh online news story, headlined "[Hassan Alleges Betrayal By Rumana](#)," the husband launched the type of smear campaign Monzur's father had feared: "She had an affair with an Iranian male during her stay in Canada for her studies since August last year," he told the press. He had deleted the Iranian man's name from her Facebook friends, he said. "Finding the Iranian guy's name deleted, she attacked me, and we had a scuffle," he said. "I lost my glasses and since I don't see well, she might have been hurt in the fight." Hassan remains in police custody. His attorney couldn't be reached for comment.

But, in the way that this story was handled differently than many, this wasn't just another headline about an attempted "honor killing" by a disgraced Muslim man. This time, the local and diaspora Bangladeshi community challenged the justification of violence. When a reporter asked Monzur at a second press conference about the allegations of an affair, Bangladeshi colleagues of Monzur, including her former professor, Mohsin, shouted, "Shame! Shame!" to quiet the spurious claims. "We have to change the very concept of what is 'good' and what is 'bad' in our societies," says Mohsin. "We have to shame the perpetrators."

"Shame against shame is one of the most important tools," says Sushanta Das Gupta, 33, the editor of [eBangladesh.com](#). "It is the time to raise the voice with the help of social media." Indeed, on one of the many Facebook pages supporting Monzur, a [Bangladeshi man wrote](#) only, "Shame! Shame! Shame!" against her husband.

The day after the husband's allegations, a young male Bangladeshi blogger, Asif Saleh, [asked](#), "Whose face are we saving?"

"It took a monster to bite the nose off his wife to wake us up to the reality that we have a very serious problem in our society. But in all likelihood this culture of silence and *maniye chola* will continue—sometimes for the children, sometimes for the society," he wrote, invoking a concept of societal shame that *maniye chola* describes in Bengali.

In Dhaka, Monzur's cousin was talking to her friends in Vancouver. There was something they could do, he advised: collect affidavits of testimony, attesting to Monzur's fidelity. A few days later, Sarah Meli, a student at the University of British Columbia and a friend of Monzur's, emailed a 22-page scan to the cousin with testimonials of how Monzur stood in the cold rain to talk long-distance to her daughter

and how she regularly had dinner with two girlfriends. A Muslim Ph.D. student from India wrote that she was like “an elder sister.” He called it “deplorable” that she was first allegedly “brutally tortured by her husband” and then “accused of infidelity to add to her agony.”

The next day, two Bangladeshi men at the University of British Columbia sent an “[Open Letter From Bangladeshi Families of Vancouver and University of British Columbia About Rumana Monzur](#)” to the eBangladesh editor:

"We are deeply shocked and mourning the brutal attack on our sister Rumana Monzur. We are writing this letter out of grave concern observing the attempts made to establish a baseless extramarital story by Rumana’s husband."

Another first cousin of Monzur’s, Emaan Mahmood, 29, a New York University M.B.A. graduate who was childhood pen pals with Monzur, said, “It’s phenomenal that the Bangladeshi community has made this a global cause.” Mahmood took to Twitter to send updates worldwide.

On June 22, Aparna Roy, a blogger and ethnographer in Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), India, penned a blog, “[Bangladesh—Rumana Monzur—A Grim Reminder of Domestic Violence](#),” linking to Bangla-language blogs that had hit the Internet over the last week. On Choturmatrik, a Bangla blog, Taef Ahmad had written: “Even wild animals living in the jungle are more humane than this.”

When the “code of silence” is broken around abuse, says Roy, “It no longer remains a personal shame that needs denial or silence. Moreover, with others getting involved, the abusers themselves then have to deal with shame and public censure, which, one hopes, will act as a deterrent at least for some.” Across the world, other activists are [harnessing the power of social media](#) to try to counter the culture of shame and silence associated with all sorts of crimes.

A month after the attack, in her hospital room in Dhaka, Monzur’s voice trembled as she related details from her marriage. She says he started beating her a few days after they were married in 2001, with a respite for a few years when he was “good,” causing her to overlook his alleged abuse. “I was blind,” she says. Upon her return from Canada, she showed her husband photos from her life in Canada, doing yoga and ice skating with friends. He flew into a rage, family members say, and beat her that night. Her father supported her leaving her husband. Her in-laws urged her to stay with him, until they returned from the U.S., family members say. The night of the attack, she said, “he pulled my hair and pressed me against the bed and grabbed my neck. He put his fingers into my eyes. He threatened me when he left that he would not let me live. He will kill me no matter where I go.”

With the community breaking its typical silence, a more nuanced universal story is emerging of a young wife struggling privately in a difficult marriage with a man who

may have been suffering himself from a mental illness, family members say.

“I want prayers right now. I want that no one else suffers like me ... I don’t know how I am handling it,” she said. “I don’t want anyone to keep secrets, things like this. They should talk about it ... I don’t know what will happen to my daughter. She is so small. I want to see her grow.”

She continued: “I really hope that my story changes lives of some. If it changes the lives of some of the women around the world, then it will be my success, I guess.” Her wish for others is that they not live in shame. “Don’t think about anything else. Don’t think about the society. Think about what is best for you.” she said.

Speaking for herself and other victims of violence, she asked, “Why will we be ashamed?...They should be ashamed.” Monzur got on a flight to Canada that night with her father. [The government of Canada just said](#) it will give her mother and daughter permits to live in Canada with her. Meanwhile, the road to recovery is just beginning. In Dhaka, her daughter just lost a tooth and cried hysterically at the sight of the small trickle of blood, remembering her mother’s attack. And, on Friday, after four surgeries, the doctors in Canada gave Monzur the grim news: her eyes are blind forever.

Asra Nomani will be teaching a course to the U.S. military in August, “Wound Collectors: Negotiating Honor, Shame, Grievances and Denial in Afghanistan and Pakistan.” Samir A. Nomani, the author’s nephew and a rising college freshman, contributed to this article.

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A bookshop employee displays copies of India's version of FHM magazine, in Mumbai, Dec. 5, 2011, Indranil Mukherjee, AFP / Getty Images

Veena Malik: She’s Outspoken, Savvy, and Topless—and She’s Shaking Up Pakistan

With her racy magazine cover, Pakistani actress Veena Malik has inflamed her homeland. She says Pakistan needs to stop the extremism—and now the country's 'honor brigade' is after her.

by [Asra Q. Nomani](#) | December 13, 2011 4:45 AM EST

The Daily Beast

In this month's issue of *FHM India*, a racy men's magazine, a saucy Pakistani actress, Veena Malik, rocked the Indian subcontinent with a topless cover photo, wearing only an ammo belt, a crossed arm over her cleavage, a grenade in her teeth, and a bold tattoo on her left bicep, "ISI," for Pakistani's nefarious intelligence agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate.

The cover has been explosive. But while the West has viewed the furor with mild confusion or amusement, many Pakistanis have taken a much more serious stance—with some calling on the actress to be thrown in jail, or worse. The blogs and listservs have lit up with angry, vituperative comments and threats. Notions of shame and honor come up time and again.

"*Sharm karo veena*," one person wrote on a fan site for the actress ("Be ashamed, Veena," in Urdu).

"Shame unto you VEENA. A disgrace to Pakistan and Islam," another person wrote on the BBC's Facebook page.

"Don't try 2 go back to Pakistan," someone warned on another fan site, calling her "*kutia*," the Urdu word for "bitch."

In Pakistan over the last year or so, a brigade of pundits, opinion shapers, former military officers, and other talking heads has emerged, taking to the airwaves and the blogosphere to defend Pakistan's honor, or *ghairat*. While they slam Malik's sexy photo shoot, calling on her citizenship to be revoked, they praise people such as the would-be Times Square bomber, Faisal Shahzad, describing him as a victim of a CIA-FBI conspiracy. They find his actions honorable.

The brigade also admires individuals such as Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani MIT graduate known as "Lady al Qaeda." She was convicted last year in a U.S. court for attempting to shoot a U.S. soldier. The government of Pakistan paid for her defense, and there is a "Free Aafia" movement in Pakistan that regularly takes to the streets.

The topless photo of Malik might just seem like another titillating stunt, pun intended. But she used the pages of the magazine to do something important—to call on Pakistanis to hold themselves and their government accountable for the extremism that has become

a part of the nation's fabric. In an interview with The Daily Beast, Malik said she doesn't expect to reach a lot of people resistant to reform. "I don't know if they are ready to change. I don't think they are ready to listen."

The actress has come to underscore a deep battle that is playing out in Pakistani and Muslim communities.

On one end of the continuum is Malik, a bright, outspoken commentator on her country's ills, brazenly critiquing corruption, nepotism, and militant extremism in Pakistan. Born in the winter of 1984, as the nascent nation of Pakistan was in the first years of an Islamist revolution led by its military dictator, Gen. Zia ul-Haq, she is the daughter of a homemaker and a father who served in the Pakistan Army and she has called her "ideal." She is college graduate in psychology, sociology, and Persian. On her website, she declares her love for her four dogs, Timmy, Tommy, Katie, and Cutie.

On the other end of the continuum is the Times Square bomber Shahzad, who is just about five years older than Malik, born in Pakistan in 1979. His mug earns one newspaper headline "Made in Pakistan," putting forth the image of Muslims and Pakistanis as scary extremists.

While Pakistani pundits slam Malik's sexy photo shoot, calling on her citizenship to be revoked, they praise the would-be Times Square bomber, Faisal Shahzad.

The *ghairat*, or honor, brigade, first set its sights on Malik last year, blasting her participation in an Indian reality show, *Bigg Boss*, as too racy. Malik catapulted to the world stage with a fiery response, defending herself in a TV debate with a *mufti*, a religious leader, named Mufti Abdul Qavi. The [video](#) went viral, rapidly making its way around the world.

In the interview, which first aired on Pakistan's Express News channel, Malik shouts at the mufti: "If you want to do something for the glory of Islam, you have plenty of opportunities. What are the politicians doing? Bribery, robbery, theft, and killing in the name of Islam. There are many things to talk about. Why Veena Malik? Because Veena Malik is a woman? Because Veena Malik is a soft target for you?"

She even takes on the taboo topic of sexual abuse in the clergy, saying: "There are many other things for you to deal with. There are Islamic clerics who rape the children they teach in their mosques, and so much more."

While Pakistan was inflamed, Western bloggers lauded her for her "smackdown of a mullah."

"As a man, as a soldier, I hope to be as courageous as you," said "Sebastian McClendon."

"You are great Veena!" wrote "Corbin Bennett."

“Veena, you rawk!!!” exclaimed “Jack Y.”

Malik comes across as a mix between America’s busty, entrepreneurial starlet Kim Kardashian and its snarky comedian-actress Tina Fey. But there is another celebrity whose chutzpah she captures. “She is sort of the Lady Gaga of Pakistan,” says Nancy Snow, a professor of propaganda and cross-cultural communications at the University of California at Fullerton. “It’s all about the spectacle. You have to be outrageous in order to be heard.”

With Malik “her power is in the physical,” adds Snow. “The image that so many people have of Muslims and Islam is so monochrome: it’s the most conservative, the most fundamental. Here is a very modern woman from Pakistan, where we have an image of society going backward. Here is a woman who is very forward-looking. She is interested in where she is going five years from now. She is interested in where Pakistan is going to be five years from now. She wants to bring Pakistan into the 21st century. That doesn’t mean that she is thumbing her nose at the traditional society. But she is saying, ‘Make room for me.’”

It’s a battle American women have certainly waged. When Marilyn Monroe had her first sex-kitten photos published in the 1950s, she promoted a new image for women in bed that suggested that women could actually enjoy sex. Later in the 1960s, when Gloria Steinem was told she didn’t look like a feminist, she countered: “This is what a feminist looks like.”

The dilemma with Malik is that, while she is in the photos, she doesn’t fully claim them. She has filed a lawsuit against the magazine, *FHM*, claiming the images were doctored to make her look fully nude, and to add the tattoo. She says she only went topless, and even then covered herself up with her arms. *FHM* denies the charges.

Kabeer Sharma, 28, the editor brought in last year to turn *FHM* around, says, “You have to herald her as a very reluctant, contradictory, media-hungry feminist . . . an accidental feminist.” He adds, “We’re not a magazine that’s in the business of rocket science. We’re not curing cancer. But people don’t live under a stone.”

Despite the lawsuit, [Sharma](#) is satisfied with the response to the cover. “I think we’ve accidentally rocked the world,” he says. Malik does have some brave Pakistani defenders. In Lahore, Pakistan, where Malik launched her career in the country’s film industry, dubbed “Lollywood” for its base in Lahore, her publicist, Sohail Rashid, says he considers her “beauty with boldness.” One young columnist, Yasser Latif Hamdani, took her side [earlier this year](#), saying, “Of course, the same guardians of Pakistan’s image are not bothered in the slightest by bloodshed and murder in broad daylight. Some of them, including leading columnists and writers in the national press, actually support murder and bloodshed. To our ghairat brigade, it does not matter that the world thinks of Pakistan as a terrorist haven.” Another Pakistani writer, Sana Saleem, slammed the attacks on Malik as “[slut-shaming](#).” In recent months, teaching U.S. military and law enforcement classes about cultural issues in Afghanistan and Pakistan, I’ve used Malik’s

debate with the mullah to show how some people are employing a thought-provoking strategy of defying conventional ideas of honor and embracing the notion of being "without honor," or *beygairat*, to challenge societal notions of what is honorable and what isn't.

Indeed, others of Malik's generation are pushing boundaries as well: a hip, young Pakistani band called Beygairat Brigade, or "brigade without honor," put out a music video, "Eggs and Potatoes," this fall, mocking [political and military leaders](#). Malik's defenders reveal a constituency tired of the tactics of societal intimidation—honor and shame. In a *Guardian* piece headlined "The fuss over [Veena Malik's 'nude' FHM cover](#) is Pakistan's real shame," Pakistani-British writer Nosheen Iqbal writes, "A flash of skin is causing more frenzied controversy than jihadists posting beheading videos online." Malik is certainly a young woman who knows the expectations of her traditional society. As a 19-year-old, she welcomed Pakistan's Geo TV channel into her house for a segment, "One Day with Geo," drinking her morning juice in pink pajamas and then modestly wrapping her head with a *dupatta*, or scarf, for footage of her in prayer. The theme of *hadd*, or boundaries, was a part of her narrative. "There are limits," she said at the time. "[We are Muslim](#)." In the segment, she opened up her curio cabinet to rows of her favorite books, including one by 20th-century Pakistani political satirist [Saadat Hasan Manto](#). Then she put on a white bodysuit and did yoga.

Today her father has disowned her in Pakistan. Malik, for her part, is shooting a new Bollywood film.

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Fethi Belaid, AFP / Getty Images

The Fatwa Against Women Touching Bananas and Other Stupid Islamic

Orders

Did an Islamic cleric ban women from touching bananas and cucumbers? True or false, Asra Q. Nomani writes, fatwas have become ridiculous. See her list of the 10 most outrageous ones.

by [Asra Q. Nomani](#) | December 10, 2011 1:40 PM EST

The Daily Beast

There is an interesting headline moving through Muslim community listservs: “Did an Islamic cleric really ban women from touching bananas and cucumbers?”

This past week, an email pinged around the world, claiming that a Muslim cleric “residing in Europe” issued a, well, interesting fatwa, or religious ruling, banning Muslim women from touching bananas or cucumbers: “He said that these fruits and vegetables ‘resemble the male penis’ and hence could arouse women or ‘make them think of sex,’” according to a report in a supposed Egyptian website, [BikyaMasr](#). *The Times of India* ran the story: “Islamic cleric bans women from touching bananas.”

“If women wish to eat these food items, a third party, preferably a male related to them such as their a father or husband, should cut the items into small pieces and serve,” the cleric supposedly dictated.

It’s hard to confirm that the fatwa is true, but the fact that we, in the Muslim community, would even think it’s possible is a reflection of just how inane the phenomenon of fatwas has become in the Muslim community. The idea of the [fatwa](#) became notorious when an Iranian cleric called for the killing of author [Salman Rushdie](#) when he published the novel *The Satanic Verses*, about an erased portion in the Koran supposedly inspired by the Devil.

The fatwas used to carry the authority of divine ordination. But the years since have revealed that, indeed, there is nothing to fear—or revere—about the fatwa. In fact, nowadays, you can get a fatwa to validate any point you want to make. I call it “fatwa shopping.”

One American-Muslim blogger, [Sheila Musaji](#), concluded the fatwa was “only shoddy reporting,” but admitted there have been enough “stupid fatwas” to “make anything easy to believe.” [Another blogger](#) tried to chase down the truth, writing: “That’s some pretty good flame-bait, but is it legit?” The BikyaMasr website credited “el-Senousa news,” but the blogger wrote, “Good luck finding it,” concluding that “the tale of the vegetable-fearing Mullah is starting to look a little short on authenticity.”

Before the story became just another apocryphal tale like the ones that emerge from the *Onion*, the satire magazine that makes up news, the e-trail to the original story was

clarified. Sunday, after unprecedented attention to the bikyamasr.com website, an email shot out from a man identifying himself as the site's editor, Joseph Mayton, apologizing for the mixup, correcting the original Egyptian media outlet that reported the "cucumber sheikh" as www.assawsana.com and linking to [the original story in Arabic](#). In an editorial, [Mayton said](#) that "the article should not have run when it did. Arguably, it should not have been run at all." Most importantly, lest we wonder, bikyamasr.com ran [an important follow up story](#), "Cucumber sheikh 'far from the truth,' says Egypt Islamic leader," Sheikh Gaber Taye' Youssef, chairman of Egypt's Religious Endowments Ministry—no pun intended, of course. The Islamic scholar was quoted saying, "God says in the Holy Qur'an 'eat and drink from what we have granted you.'"

Nowadays, you can get a fatwa to validate any point you want to make. I call it "fatwa shopping."

True or not, the possibility of such a fatwa underscores the long Ridiculist of fatwas, to borrow CNN host Anderson Cooper's nightly feature of news stories of the absurd. "That cleric is an idiot," one Muslim wrote. "But what am I going to do now? I eat lots of bananas because I am vegetarian," wrote Farzana Hassan, a progressive Canadian-Muslim leader.

In our Muslim community, we've had enough comic fatwas to create our own Fatwa Ridiculist. Some of my nominees:

1. A man can work with a woman to whom he's not a brother, father, uncle, or son, if he [drinks her breast milk first](#).
2. A husband can [divorce his wife with a text message](#), declaring: "I divorce you. I divorce you. I divorce you."
3. Muslim [girls can't be tomboys](#).
4. [Mickey Mouse](#) is a corrupting influence and must die.
5. [Emoticons](#) are illegal.
6. You can't wear a [Manchester United soccer jersey](#).
7. A husband and wife [can't have sex naked](#).
8. [Pokemon](#) is as bad as Mickey Mouse.
9. Ditch the downward dog. [Yoga is forbidden](#).
10. Girls above the age of 13 [can't ride bikes](#). (See fatwa No. 3.)

To all of this I have only one thing to say: Please pass the banana split. :P

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