

PAKISTAN: Pakistan toughens laws on rape and 'honor killings' of women

By Salman Masood

NY Times (06.10.2016) – <http://nyti.ms/2dJzglS> – The Pakistani Parliament on Thursday passed laws to increase sentences for rapists and those who commit so-called honor killings of women, and closed a loophole that allowed many of the killers to go free, after hours of heated opposition from Islamist lawmakers.

Each year, hundreds of Pakistani women are killed by relatives angered by behavior they believe has impugned the family's reputation, according to human rights activists, who have campaigned against the practice and called for tougher laws for years.

Most of those killings have gone without punishment because of a tenet of Islamic law that allows killers to go free if they are forgiven by the woman's family – something that usually happens because the killers are usually family members.

“Under the new law, relatives of the victim would only be able to pardon the killer if he is sentenced to capital punishment,” Zahid Hamid, the law minister, said on the floor of the National Assembly. “However, the culprit would still face a mandatory life sentence.”

The Parliament was divided in a debate that lasted hours, with particular opposition from Islamist political parties that insisted the bill must be approved by a clerical panel before being passed. That requirement has been a sticking point in past attempts to enact legal protections for women.

This time, the government and supporters of the bill from the opposition benches ruled that step out.

In the other legislation passed on Thursday, Mr. Hamid, the law minister, said that verdicts in rape cases would have to be given within three months, and that sentences would increase.

“We have made it mandatory that the culprit must be imprisoned for 25 years,” he said, adding that the rape of minors and the mentally and physically disabled has also become punishable under the law.

“These bills are hugely important for Pakistani women, where rape conviction rates were almost nonexistent, due in large part to various technical obstacles to accessing justice,” Yasmeen Hassan, the global executive director of the rights group Equality Now, said in a statement. “We hope that these new laws will help generate a cultural shift in Pakistani society and that women will be able to live their lives in safety.”

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif hailed the passage of the legislation, saying that there was “no honor in honor killings.”

“I congratulate the Parliament, the NGOs, civil society, academia, media and all those who worked hard and supported us in the passage of this legislation,” Mr. Sharif said, referring to nongovernmental organizations.

He said his government would ensure enforcement of the legislation.

“I feel so relieved,” said Sughra Imam, a former senator, who had originally pushed for legislation against the honor-killing practice. “I hope they will help,” Ms. Imam said in an interview, referring to the new laws.

“No law will completely eliminate crime,” she said. “But at the very least, it should hold those who violate the law and principles of justice to account.”