

Southall Black Sisters Zoorah Shah » Southall Black Sisters

<http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/campaigns/zoorah-shah/>

EXIT WEBSITE ↩



Zoorah Shah

‘I had become a bed mattress for all the men in the community’ **Zoorah Shah 2000**

The case of Zoorah Shah represented our toughest challenge in respect of battered women who kill. In the 1970s, Zoorah Shah came to Bradford from Mirpur in rural Pakistan, following an arranged marriage. She was subjected to violence and abuse throughout her marriage and eventually whilst she was pregnant with her fourth child, she was, along with her three young children, abandoned by her husband. She was rejected by her community and as there were no refuges or services for abused Asian women in Bradford, she found herself homeless, destitute and isolated. In these desperate circumstances she was befriended by Mohammed Azam, a drug dealer from the criminal underworld of Bradford, who offered to secure her accommodation by arranging a mortgage in his name although she made all the payments from her benefits, factory work

earnings and savings. Azam, although a married man with children, used his financial hold over Zoora to sexually enslave her. Her house had become a prison for her and she could not free herself from Azam's control over her.

Azam used Zoora for sex as and when he pleased including in a cemetery where she had buried her two other children who had died at childbirth. He also possessed firearms and threatened to use his contacts in the criminal world to find her if she tried to run away. He also made repeated threats to throw her and her children onto the streets if she disobeyed him. When Azam was convicted of dealing in heroin and sent to prison for ten years, he tried to pimp Zoora to male inmates on the point of release.

Zoora's GP and social services records show that she suffered from depression and illness throughout her married life which gradually deteriorated during her relationship with Azam. She had countless abortions, viral and kidney infections and suffered from anemia and malnutrition. But she found it impossible to leave Azam. The final straw came when she feared that Azam had sexual designs on her daughters. Zoora administered poison bought in Pakistan in Azam's food, not caring whether he lived or died. Following Azam's death, she was charged with murder and attempted murder and a number of other offences. At her trial in 1993, Zoora Shah denied having committed the murder and refused to give evidence out of fear and shame. She chose to remain silent about her abuse in the hope of saving the honour of her daughters. Her main concern was to avoid her daughters from being condemned to a life of prostitution. Zoora was found guilty on all counts and given a life sentence with a tariff of twenty years.

SBS became involved in Zoora's case following her conviction. We campaigned and gathered a new legal team and worked with them to prepare her case for appeal on the basis of fresh evidence. Her account of violence and sexual and financial exploitation in her marriage and relationship with Mohammed Azam had not been heard and extensive medical evidence supporting her claim that she was suffering from diminished responsibility at the time of the fatal act had been ignored. Her appeal was heard in 1998. Despite strong medical and other evidence, she lost the appeal mainly because the judges deemed her story of surviving by her wits in an all-male, criminal world in absolute poverty to be 'incapable of belief.'

In 2000, following a concerted campaign by us, Lord Justice Bingham was asked by the Home Secretary to give his views and recommendations on Zoora's tariff. He recommended that her tariff be reduced from 20 to 12 years and this recommendation was accepted. In giving his reasons, Lord Justice Bingham accepted the new evidence that we had put forward but which had been dismissed by the Court of Appeal. He rejected the Court of Appeal's view that Zoora Shah committed a particularly callous and premeditated murder for material gain. On the contrary, he stated that 'this was the conduct of a desperate woman threatened with the loss of her home and with destitution in what remained for her a foreign country'. Given the circumstances of her case and the ignorance and arrogance displayed by the Court of Appeal in respect of race and gender issues, the reduction in tariff represented a major achievement for SBS.

We continued to support Zoorah throughout her imprisonment and helped her obtain crucial psychotherapy which played a major role in her eventual release. She was finally released in 2006 and now lives with her children and grandchildren.

For more details about the Zoorah Shah case and campaign see '[From homebreakers to jailbreakers](#)' SBS, Zed publishers (2003)

[Abolish No Recourse to Public Funds campaign](#)

[The Forced Marriage campaign](#)

[Save Southall Black Sisters campaign \(2008\)](#)

[Zoorah Shah \(1996-2000\)](#)

[Kiranjit Ahluwalia \(1990-1992\)](#)

[Campaign Songs](#)