

Noor

Asima K Ahmad, MD, MPH

FAISALABAD, 1984

He couldn't stop smiling. After all, he'd been waiting for this day for a while. Laughing to himself, he buttoned his *kameez*. Saleem had waited several years to get married. In his conservative, traditional Pakistani family, he could wed only after his elders had already done so. As the seventh of eight children, and fourth of five boys, his wait had been particularly long.

Having finished dressing, he stared at his reflection in the mirror.

"Noor," he whispered to himself with a smile. She was a beauty.

Saleem and his mother, Shareefa Begum, had traveled together on his small, red, sun-kissed motorcycle to ask for Noor's hand only a few months ago. The home they approached was small, with cement walls surrounding a distinctive green door. As he helped his mother off the bike, the door flew open; several children charged out, screaming with excitement. His eyes darted inside, trying to catch a glance of Noor, but three young ladies quickly ran toward them, welcomed Shareefa Begum inside, and closed the door, smiling at Saleem all the while.

As he waited outside, he busied himself kicking a small rock through the sand. He walked around to the side of the house and heard a faint laughter, followed by a jingle of *churiya*. He looked up toward a small window with vertical bars and pasty orange curtains. The subtle breeze moved the curtains as he walked closer to see who was there. He could make out the back of a young girl wearing a light blue *shal-waar kameez* and chasing a little child. She had a deli-

cate, innocent giggle. The child ran away; as the girl turned back toward the window, pulling her hair back into a braid, their eyes met. He would never forget those eyes, large, green with specks of gray, brown and yellow, lined with *kajol*. She lowered her gaze before nervously looking back at him. "Noor!" her sister Khadijha called. Flustered, she ran out of the room.

Saleem smiled to himself as she ran away, "She's the one."

It was an arranged marriage, but he was already in love with her.

"*Kabool hai* (I do)," he whispered. He turned away from the mirror and headed to the *masjid*, where their *nikah* would be performed.

As Noor's sisters led her into the small room, Saleem was already seated with the groomsmen and the Imam, his face covered with a *sehra*. A bright red *dupatta* with gold *ghota* trimming covered Noor's face, all but her lips, which she pursed tightly as she considered the prospect of sitting next to Saleem. Her sisters placed a mirror in their laps and they both glanced down to see one another. This was the second time their eyes had met. He reached for her hand as she lowered her gaze. He wasn't planning on letting go.

THE OUTSKIRTS OF FAISALABAD, 9 MONTHS LATER

"Stronger!" the *dhai* instructed. Noor pushed again, sweat dripping down her forehead.

"No, I can't do it anymore. Take me to the hospital," Noor cried. She had been pushing for several hours to no avail; the baby's head had made no progress. Although her three *bhabhis*, a local lady health worker, and *dhai* had been with her throughout the process, she knew she had to go to a hospital to deliver.

Yusuf was born by vacuum delivery at 2:05 AM in Faisalabad's public hospital. His head was quite swollen and bruised; Saleem and Noor were assured it was normal and a temporary side effect of the vacuum delivery. They sat together in bed admiring their

From the Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences, Yale University School of Medicine, New Haven, Connecticut.

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Corresponding author: Asima Ahmad, MD, MPH, Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Reproductive Sciences, Yale University School of Medicine, 310 Cedar St New Haven, CT 06510-3218; e-mail: asima.ahmad@yale.edu.

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beautiful son. He had Saleem's prominent nose, framed by hair as dark as night.

Three hours of calm passed before Saleem suddenly called for the doctor.

"What's wrong with him?" said Saleem, who held Yusuf as he struggled to breathe.

Dr. Rana explained to Saleem that the baby, having been kept in an air-conditioned room after birth, had now developed pneumonia.

"He will need oxygen," explained Dr. Rana.

"So, give it to him! He's not well. Look at him!" Saleem called out, terrified as he clutched onto his little boy.

"We don't have any oxygen in this hospital, though," Dr. Rana stated under his breath, his words muffled as he briskly walked away.

Distraught, Saleem walked back to Noor's room. There was no other large hospital nearby that would reliably have oxygen. Besides, Saleem only had his bicycle, and he didn't feel safe taking his son out if he had pneumonia.

Noor looked at Saleem; as their eyes met, they knew what was to pass.

Both of them held Yusuf close and watched as his breathing began to slow. Eventually, his breaths became so soft that his chest was no longer moving. On August 22, 1985, as the *azaan* for *Maghrib* (sunset) prayer sounded over the speaker at the local mosque, Yusuf took his final breath, closed his eyes, and fell into a sound, eternal sleep.

FAISALABAD, 1989

Noor waddled across the room and kneeled over, sweeping the floor with her *jharoo*. Her belly was getting in the way now, but she wasn't going to let that keep her from having anything less than a spotless home.

"Saleem!" she shrieked, grabbing her belly, as the *jharoo* fell limply onto the floor.

Almost immediately, everyone arrived at the house. Noor lay in bed, a peripheral IV placed in her right wrist, which stung as the fluids ran. She had pushed for 2 hours—a veritable eternity. The *dhai* and lady health worker quickly reconfirmed a fetal heartbeat with their makeshift fetoscope.

"Want to go to the hospital? I can't bear to see you like this," Saleem asked, caressing Noor's forehead as he placed his other hand on her cheek.

Eyes welling and reddening with rage, Noor turned to him quickly, "No! Absolutely not! They killed my son. We're better off at home."

She had vowed never to return to a hospital after Yusuf died. How could they have said there was no

oxygen? It was a government hospital! They had oxygen, it just wasn't affordable.

"No!" with one final bloodcurdling scream she delivered the baby, its umbilical cord wrapped around its fragile neck.

"Why isn't the baby crying? What happened?" Saleem cried from outside the room. The *dhai* and lady health worker frantically grabbed the baby, attempting their best to resuscitate it. As Saleem rushed inside, hysteria grew among the group of people gathered at the foot of the bed. Noor turned her head away, her face expressionless, as a solitary tear emerged out from the corner of her eye and traveled its way down her cheek, running into specks of dry blood on the way.

She closed her eyes, her mind lost in thought—had she killed this son?

FAISALABAD, 1991

Noor had been having on and off intense contractions for 3 days now. Her *bhabhis* had come and gone several times over that period; this last tour had already lasted 8 hours. The lady health worker had started Noor on IV fluids, maintaining a constant vigil at her bedside all the while.

She had been so careful during this pregnancy. She had always been a picky eater, getting away with drinking tea and small snacks instead of heavy meals. During this pregnancy, however, she made sure to eat lots of fruits, vegetables, and some meat alongside her typical *roti* with *shorba* and *achaar*.

This time was different. This time, she didn't need to push many times before Talha was born. This time, he came into the world screaming and full of life. Tears of happiness and relief ran down her face as she held him. "Finally," she thought, as Saleem came running into the room.

"Look. Our son. He's beautiful," Noor whispered to Saleem as she held him close to her breast. She did it. She had a child. She was going to be the best mother this child could have. Noor held him closer and kissed him on the nose. She giggled, "He looks just like me."

FAISALABAD, 1993

Talha ran around the small house, jumping from *manja* to *manja* to show off his super powers to his cousins visiting from America. They eagerly joined in, running to the rooftop and back as Talha led the way.

Noor watched them from the living room, smiling as she prepared custard for her guests.

"Auntie! Look at me!" her niece Yasmeen screamed as she jumped onto the cement floor. Noor laughed



quietly and shook her head. I'd like to have a girl next, she thought.

"Look at Talha. Skinny little thing, doesn't eat anything. If the mother can manage on tea, it doesn't mean you have to keep the kid hungry." Noor overheard the local relatives, who had all come over for dinner, talking about her again. Although slightly offended, Noor shrugged it off. Talha was a special boy. He couldn't tolerate solids very well and consumed mostly liquids and soft foods. Yes, he ate very little, but Noor was feeding him every opportunity she had. I'm a great mom, she reassured herself.

She focused again on the children, squinting her eyes and picturing what it would be like if she had a daughter. She then turned back to the custard, which she was cooling in a larger pot full of ice and water; it was almost ready. Smiling, she gave it one last whirl, the large wedding *churi* dangling on her delicate wrist.

FAISALABAD, 1996

The *dhai* checked Noor's cervix and in the process felt a small gush of fluid. Her nails were long, and she quickly pulled away her fingers. She had not meant to rupture her membranes and, given Noor's obstetric history, nervously announced, "It's the same as before."

Noor's contractions had started earlier in the evening. It was nearly two in the morning; she had called everyone over much earlier in the night, soon after her contractions began. She had told Saleem earlier, "I'm not going to make it this time."

To reassure her, he had agreed to have everyone over, including the same *dhai* and lady health worker as her previous deliveries. Her three *bhabhis* were at her bedside.

Bari bhabhi Shameela held her hand and reassured her, holding her head in her lap. She had delivered 10 children of her own; she knew what Noor was experiencing. "You're fine. Watch, this time you'll have a girl."

Several hours passed. Concerned, Saleem called over a local physician from the village. He examined Noor and walked out of the room with the *dhai*.

Noor could see them whispering to one another. Through the little sliver of curtain that failed to cover the doorway, the *dhai* appeared very concerned—about what, she did not know.

The doctor stepped back in. "Did the bag around the baby break or not?" Noting a trickle of yellow fluid during the examination, he suspected that Noor had ruptured her membranes.

"No," everyone in the room replied, looking at one another confused. The *dhai* tucked herself behind a curtain in the room and lowered her gaze.

"We don't know how it ruptured, but this baby needs to be born soon," he announced.

Noor squeezed *bari bhabhi* Shameela's hand and looked at her, yearning for some reassurance. They both knew, however, that something was wrong.

"I'm not going to make it," she whimpered, looking at Shameela. Shameela kissed her hand and caressed her forehead. "You just need to deliver this kid," she replied, quickly turning her eyes away so Noor wouldn't be able to detect her growing doubt.

After 30 minutes of pushing, Noor delivered a boy. He was lifeless, pale with purple lips, and could not be stimulated awake. The ladies in the room tucked away their faces in their shawls, weeping and unable to provide solace to Noor given their sorrow at her great misfortune.

"Oh, my fate..." Noor whispered as her head fell to the side.

Shameela turned to comfort her. She was met by the sight of blood pouring out of Noor's womb. The women quickly grabbed towels to soak up the blood, which continued to spurt out, cascading onto the floor.

"Saleem!" Shameela screamed. Saleem ran into the room. He became dizzy at the sight of his wife, limp with large puddles of bright red blood covering the floor, surrounded by women frantically asking for help.

"Saleem," Noor quietly called to him. He ran to hold her hand. "Take me to the hospital."

"Hurry! Go!" *choti bhabhi* Shameela yelled.

Frantic, he ran out of the room. Heart racing, clothes drenched with sweat, and weeping, he wasn't sure what to do. There was no ambulance to call. He couldn't take her on his bicycle. He called his brothers and ran out of the house.

Within 20 minutes, they returned with a van they were able to rent from a town nearby. As they turned the corner toward his home, the van's front tire fell into a ditch. Saleem, desperate to get to his wife, froze when the van stopped moving.

"Saleem!" Masood, his brother, shook him. "We'll get the van out. You get Noor."

Startled, Saleem wrestled his way out of the car and ran to his home. He was only three houses down, but his body was growing limp as he ran for what seemed like an eternity before reaching Noor. The group quickly helped carry Noor to the vehicle. The bleeding had decreased only slightly. She was coming in and out of consciousness; her lifeless arms hung to her sides.

They moved as quickly as the area's poorly paved roads would allow, knowing that the hospital was



a good 30 minutes away. Saleem kept turning back to look at her. Noor was lying over her *bhabhis'* laps. *Choti* and *bari bhabhi* Shameela were on the sides with her brother's sister in the middle. Blood dripped down her legs and continued to pool on the floor of the van.

"How far is it?" Noor asked in a soft voice, her words trailing off as she spoke.

Choti bhabhi Shameela grabbed her hand tight, "It'll just be a little while." Shameela turned to look at Saleem, tears welling up in her eyes. They both knew there was still a distance to go. Noor asked once again how far the hospital was, after which she didn't speak again. Masood had just turned the corner past their mother's house in Mansoorabad when *bhabhi* Shameela felt Noor's grip loosening. Noor's leg softly fell to the side as she took her last breath.

They arrived at the hospital at noon, where Noor was declared dead on arrival.

Saleem, covered in blood, took several steps back and fell against a wall. Everything was blurring. He felt that he was far removed, in another place far from all this. He stared in front of him but saw nothing. He had promised to keep her safe and never let her go. Her laughter echoed in his ears.

He couldn't cry; he was numb. His family and doctors ran to his side to comfort him and he pushed them away. "You guys killed my wife! We killed her!" he yelled, his face reddened and wet with sweat and cascading tears. Masood held him as he wept onto his shoulder. "We killed her," he whimpered, his words muffled by his brother's shoulder.

OUTSIDE FAISALABAD, PRESENT DAY

Awakened by the sounds of the *azaan* for *Fajr* prayer, Saleem rose to perform his morning prayers. Next in his daily ritual, a quick motorbike ride to pick up milk for his family—his new wife, Gulzaar, their two children and Talha.

As he returned home to deliver the milk before heading to work, Saleem overheard the sound of familiar laughter—of Talha teasing his two younger siblings as he roused them for school. Saleem smiled; he had so much for which to be thankful.

He walked into the house, milk in hand as his children turned to greet him. This was the moment he lived for each day, the moment when Talha's gaze would first meet his own.

After all, he had his mother's eyes.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Every time I reflect on the story of my aunt, I am overcome with grief. She was not alone in her suffering. Poverty and poor access to basic medical

care continue to take the lives of innocent women and children in developing nations worldwide. I hope her personal experience provides insight into the hope and devastation women in developing nations face on a daily basis and inspires us all to assist in improving their survival and happiness.

Although developed nations have made large strides in conquering maternal mortality in the past century, developing nations still struggle with this devastating outcome. An estimated 535,900 maternal deaths occurred worldwide in 2005. Of these, 99% occurred in developing nations, with South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa accounting for 86% of maternal deaths.¹

Achieving sustainable decreases in maternal mortality in these regions, then, requires a multifaceted approach, one inclusive of both vertical and horizontal interventions and predicated on collaboration between national governments, donor agencies, non-governmental organizations, health care professionals, the media, and the general public.²

At the outset, national governments must prioritize maternal mortality, drawing both societal and media attention to this issue. For rural and socioeconomically constrained areas, one must focus on affordable, low-barrier initiatives. Noor's situation, sadly, is hardly unique: she received poor to no prenatal care, did not have uterotronics available at the bedside, and had poor access to emergency medical facilities.

Other nations' efforts to address these concerns have focused on formal training of skilled birth attendants—health workers charged with the primary responsibility of successful delivery, working, as necessary, under the supervision of physicians. Training local birth attendants and providing them with the basic medications, including uterotronics, needed to help treat peripartum and postpartum hemorrhage often proves to be more sustainable on the ground level. The concomitant development of evaluation and monitoring systems, with mandatory reporting of all birth outcomes, has generated meaningful gains in birth-outcomes improvement. Further work is needed, however, to determine the cost-effectiveness of these interventions, to determine whether we achieve true return on investment in the developing world.

Access, of course, remains a challenge to many expectant mothers, whether in the global North or South. Some nations thus have directed significant resources to the establishment of birthing centers.² These birthing centers would be located in villages, enhancing local access to prenatal, postpartum, and general medical care alike. Some data suggest greater cultural acceptance of birthing centers relative to that



of local hospitals, with the promise of enhanced attendance and birth outcomes as a result. Had birthing centers such as these existed in Faisalabad, Noor's story, given her fear of hospitals and preference for female health care providers, may have had a different ending.

There is no single solution, no "silver bullet," to decrease maternal mortality in developing nations. Through a multifaceted approach led by cross-sector collaborative efforts, however, we can effect meaningful change. The dawn of this millennium saw the Millennium Development Goal of maternal mortality

ratio reduction worldwide by 75% between 1990 and 2015. If we are to see that promise realized—and to ensure that women like Noor do not die in vain—we must make it ours as well.

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