

SB PRODUCTIONS
PRESENTS

Quest For Honor

A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY MARY ANN SMOTHERS BRUNI



1 HOUR AND 5 MINUTES – IN KURDISH LANGUAGE WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES
WORLD PREMIERE 2009 SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL



NOMINATION



2009

QUEST FOR HONOR
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SYNOPSIS

The alarming rise in “honor killing,” the heinous act of men killing daughters, sisters, and wives who threaten “family honor,” endangers tens of thousands of women in Iraq, Turkey, Jordan and adjoining countries. Global communication through satellite television, Internet, and cell phones has raised the expectations of young Middle Eastern women, who now are not content to marry a much older relative their father might chooses and live a life of servitude. While young women respond to new ideas from cyber pals in Los Angeles or episodes of popular Western sit-coms, their fathers and brothers demand strict tribal justice for their acts. Particularly in rural areas women have been killed simply for having unfamiliar phone numbers on their cell phones or speaking to men who are not relatives.

The Women’s Media Center of Suleymaniyah, Iraq, has joined forces with Iraq’s Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to end the heinous practice of “honor killing” of women.

First time filmmaker Mary Ann Smothers Bruni – who is an author and photographer – documents these horrible acts and the people who are fighting to end these senseless killings that take place in Kurdistan in the new feature film QUEST FOR HONOR.

A call to the Women’s Media Center reveals that a woman’s body has been found in a field near Ranya, a border town in the “Wild East” where Iraq, Iran, and Turkey meet. RUNAK Faraj, the center’s leader, and her colleague Kalthum Murad Ibrahim are requested to join local Ranya Police Chief Abudullah at the crime scene. Abdullah’s cell phone shows a most devastating image of a young woman clad in blue jeans and grabbing her hair in the agony of death. The woman is named Nesrin, a young widow dispossessed of her children who has no apparent family close by. Her mother is dead and her father living abroad. No one cares for her, and no one knows who murdered her.

“Why doesn’t the government fund shelters for homeless woman rather than spend resources investigating their inevitable murders,” Kalthum asks Ranya’s mayor.

It is answers to these questions that QUEST FOR HONOR attempts to find as the camera follows Faraj and her colleagues as they investigate and report murder and violent cases like this one and others.

In Suleymaniyah, a woman is shot at the Asuda Safe House. “The shooting at Asuda poses a threat to all women,” proclaims Runak Rauf, director of the Women Media Center. Journalists Hemen Kaikai and Lawen Asad investigate and talk to the victim and her assailant in an eye-opening interview. Jasmin (a pseudonym), now in a shelter provided by the KRG’s newly formed Agency to Prevent Violence Against Women tells the interviewers she was shot three times while preparing for evening prayer. Captain Nariman reveals that Jasmin remains in great danger even though the Agency has taken three men into custody.

Rewan, the Women's Media Center newspaper, vigorously pursues these cases in an effort to get the stories out, educate the public, and change tradition. Kurdish main media follows their lead.

QUEST FOR HONOR exposes these killings and violent acts, as the police Chief Abdullah states his frustration on camera that "no one is convicted." Interviews with victims of attempted honor killings, their perpetrators, the police, government officials, and community leaders coupled with the filmed investigations of these killings provide insight into a practice that must be stopped. QUEST FOR HONOR is produced and directed by Mary Ann Smothers Bruni for SB Productions and will make its world premiere at the 2009 Sundance Film Festival in January.

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The guys of Iraq have filled our television screens—the squawky politicians, the mad bombers, the rare intelligent voice. But where are the women? Iraq is a civilized and educated society whose roots go into ancient time. Women have been a part of the action there since long ago.

When the Smothers Bruni Foundation's (SBF) secretary Sissy Farenthold and I met with our advisor Elizabeth "BJ" Warnock Fernea, (professor *emerita* Middle Eastern Studies, University of Texas, producer of 6 films and several books on Middle Eastern women), we pondered that question. All three of us have spent extensive time in Iraq. BJ's book *Guest of the Sheikh*, an entertaining ethnography on life with the wives of a Shia sheikh, has been in constant print for over forty years. Sissy has traveled to Iraq on missions from women's groups. And I had discovered Iraq by simply walking up a mountain in April 1991 and joining the masses estimated at about two million people, who were fleeing the gun ships of Saddam, as the Kurdish uprising fell. The spunk and the intelligence of the women struck me then and continued to grow as I moved into Iraqi Kurdistan for three years to prepare a book and exhibition entitled *Journey through Kurdistan*.

We decided that putting a face on the women of the Middle East, particularly those of Iraq, should be the Number One priority with SB Foundation. We further decided that video and film best served this purpose. With that in mind, we formed and funded SB Productions, LLC., wholly owned by the Smothers Bruni Foundation.

The failing situation in Baghdad dictated that we could only work freely in the north at that time. Thus the *Zhinan* (Kurdish for women) project was born. Our mission was to explore and document the situation of the women in northern Iraq. This would include Christians, Yezidis and other groups, as well as Kurds, who inhabited the region under the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq.

Zhinan was a mission of exploration and discovery. The three stories that we eventually filmed came about slowly. We did not craft them. We discovered them. Along with the exploration and discovery, we documented and we filmed. We have over 500 hours of footage documenting life in Iraqi Kurdistan, as well as interviews with women judges, politicians, physicians, and poets.

We went to Iraqi Kurdistan to record the success stories of women rebuilding Iraq. Once there, we were even more taken by the narrative of women struggling with the region's worst nightmare--the horror of "honor killing" and the related practices of trading and selling women. The problem of honor killing lies deep in the roots of Middle Eastern culture. Its obliteration requires the hard work of brave and dedicated local activists and politicians.

Western media is now covering this practice and depicts it in simplistic terms. It is urgent that the West begin to understand this custom so that we can support the women, lawmen, and governments who are fighting this plague and not victimize them further by being seduced into believing negative stereotypes of their culture.

While QUEST FOR HONOR could not have been filmed in some countries, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was not only open but was extremely helpful to our filming. The KRG itself is fighting the problem of “honor killing” with laws by creating better safe houses and establishing a special Agency to Prevent Violence Against Women. That agency gave us exclusive access to follow the high profile case of Jasmin (pseudonym), the woman who was shot at Asuda Safe House, whose story is featured in *Quest for Honor*.

We had great collaboration and assistance from the locals. Hirau Ibrahim Ahmad - filmmaker, video producer, activist and wife of the Jalal Talabani, the first Kurdish president of Iraq-- provided cars and guards for our crew, which made it possible to work in the Rania area, sometimes troubled by PKK-Turkish fighting and Iran’s shelling of dissident camps and refugees there.

Ako *agha*, a prominent leader in Rania, offered the crew his home and hospitality for part of the shoot. Women from The Women’s Media Center opened their homes and intimate moments of their lives, as well as their work, to us.

Kurds were on both sides of our cameras—busy at work as cameramen, assistant directors, story consultants, production managers, advisors and translators. We let them tell their own story and reveal themselves without explanations or interruptions from outsiders or experts.

Our participants show how investigations of honor killings are handled and the lawmen’s, activists’ and villagers’ diverse attitudes towards these murders. They allow us to experience safe houses, markets, and daily work both in the countryside and cities. The strange beauty, that is Rania, opens up to us in walks and drives through that city’s streets and the adjacent fields and mountains.

I have been visiting Iraqi Kurdistan for 18 years creating *Journey Through Kurdistan*, a book and exhibition; *Stations for Leila*, a photographic meditation on the murder of a good friend in Duhok, Iraq; and *Zagros Prayers*, created for the Mountain Institute to exhibit at a United Nations conference in Bhutan.

My experiences and contacts have enabled us to produce a nuanced version of women in Iraqi Kurdistan and their experiences in creating a safe world for women in this new century. I am committed to fleshing out our depiction of these women with two more films based on the amazing roles they have assumed in the recovery from Saddam’s brutal genocidal attempt on the Kurds and the rebuilding of Iraqi Kurdistan and the surprising career choices they are making in the new Iraq.

I hope that QUEST FOR HONOR will bring the men and women of Iraqi Kurdistan to life in their full complexity for an international audience and educate all people about the vast process of cultural change taking place in Iraqi Kurdistan and similar places. I hope that the film will make Western human rights activists aware of the work being done by their counterparts in Kurdistan on honor killings and other abuses against women. And ultimately, I hope that QUEST FOR HONOR will help to begin the dialogue and inspire individuals to get involved in stopping the violence against women in their own hometowns and around the world.

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GLOSSARY, BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

HONOR KILLINGS

"Honor killing" is the practice of men killing women who have brought "dishonor" to the family name, primarily through extramarital sexual activity. It is not exclusively a twenty-first century Kurdish, Middle Eastern, or Moslem problem. Under Roman law, a father could kill his daughter or wife with impunity for reasons of honor. "Honor killings" were frequent enough in 17th Century Spain for a *genre* known as "honor killing dramas" that depicted the practice to become popular. The best known of these are by Spain's foremost dramatist Pedro Calderon de la Barca and include "*El medico de su honra*, The Physician of his Honor," in which a doctor bleeds his wife to death because of suspicion of dishonor, even though he knows she has been faithful. Calderon was a priest, and some scholars connected "honor killing" of that day to the Counterreformation and the Roman Catholic Church, just as some writers today attribute it to Islam.

Most likely "honor killing" is a pre-Christian, pre-Islamic practice based on the consideration of women as property whose ability, and perhaps duty to produce offspring must be regulated by men of the family. Dowry deaths and crimes of passion have the same roots.

"Honor killings" came to the Americas with the Spanish and were legal until the latter part of the twentieth century in various American countries. Similar traditions still persist in some of the southwestern states of the USA.

VOCABULARY

Honor Killing: The practice of men killing their wives, daughters, or sisters who have brought dishonor to the family, sometimes by simply having an unknown cell phone number or speaking with a man not of the family.

Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG): The freely elected parliament and officials who rule the Kurdish region of Iraq as defined by the Iraqi constitution.

Agency to Prevent Violence Against Women: An agency of the Ministry of Interior of the Kurdistan Regional Government that shelters, protects, and advises women in danger of honor killing or other violence.

Safe House: A place where women in danger of honor killing can be sheltered.

Zhin ba zhin: Trading one woman for another, for example trading a young girl for a wife for her brother. The younger girls will not be taken to their groom's home until they reach adolescence, but they still are married.

Trades for Blood: Applies to women who are exchanged in a peace settlement between families, for example when a member of one family has killed a member of the other.

BACKGROUND

The alarming rise in honor killing, the heinous act of men killing daughters, sisters, and wives who threaten “family honor,” endangers tens of thousands of women in Iraq, Turkey, Jordan and adjoining countries. Global communication through satellite television, Internet, and cell phones has raised the expectations of young Middle Eastern women, who now are not content to marry a much older relative their father might chooses and live a life of servitude. While young women respond to new ideas from cyber pals in Los Angeles or episodes of popular Western sit-coms, their fathers and brothers demand strict tribal justice for their acts. In rural areas women have been killed simply for having unfamiliar phone numbers on their cell phones or speaking to men who are not relatives.

The United Nations and international human rights organizations like Amnesty International repeatedly cite the urgency to eradicate the practice of “honor killing” in yearly and regional reports. Kurdish media and on-the-ground activists point to climbing statistics in their towns and regions of honor killings and the increasing numbers of women committing suicide to escape their fates.

While international human rights organizations work to combat the practice of honor killings, it is the women activists, such as those portrayed in *Quest for Honor* who wake up to the every day realities of these realities and boldly face them head on. Cooperating with local police, doctors, lawyers, and politicians in their communities, these brave women save the lives of countless women and work to change mentalities and prevent future crimes. Without proper analysis and knowledge the West cannot appropriately support the women, lawmen, and governments who are fighting this plague without being seduced into believing negative cultural stereotypes and further victimizing these communities.

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FILMMAKER BIO

MARY ANN SMOTHERS BRUNI

Mary Ann Smothers Bruni is a first time filmmaker. In April 1991 she walked up a mountain above Turkey and into Iraq, where she joined the two million Kurds fleeing the wrath of Saddam after the failure of the Kurdish uprising. She returned to Iraq in June, in search of the families she had known in the mountains. Her experiences over the next three years in Iraqi Kurdistan were recorded in a 1994 book and photographic exhibition "*Journey through Kurdistan*," sponsored by The University of Texas, Texas Memorial Museum, and University of Texas Press.

In 1998 Bruni launched "*Stations for Leila*," a tribute in Christian and Islamic images to her friend Leila, who was brutally and mysteriously murdered in Duhok, Iraq, at the Southwest School of Art and Craft as part of San Antonio's Contemporary Art Month. As *Stations* traveled to galleries and museums, it expanded into an extensive exhibition called "***Stations for Leila: Ritual and Belief***" that included images from seven different religions in five different countries. The exhibit is always presented in a "Stations of the Cross" format and emphasizes the death of innocent victims.

Bruni returned to Iraqi Kurdistan in 2002 to photograph an exhibition "*Zagros Prayers*" featuring images of Kurdish women printed on silk for The Mountain Institute in Washington, DC, the United Nations and the Kingdom of Bhutan. This exhibit was included as part of the United Nation's Year of the Mountain celebration in Bhutan in September 2002.

In 2005 she returned to scout locations and stories for three films on Kurdish women. QUEST FOR HONOR is the first of these films she wants to make.

Bruni's earlier writings and photographs center on Texas-Mexican folk arts - drama, music, poetry -- as seen through the lens of her studies of medieval and Latin American literature at Mexico City College (now University of the Americas) and as a graduate student at The University of Madrid. The background for her books and exhibitions are archived at the prestigious Benson Latin American Collection of The University of Texas Library. Her awards for that work include a "*lazo de dama*" medal from the Order of Isabel la Catolica, awarded by Juan Carlos, King of Spain.

Bruni's published books include *Journey through Kurdistan*, *Viva la Virgen de Guadalupe*, *Rosita's Christmas Wish*, and *Los Pastores*. Her photographs have been shown in London, Bhutan, Canada, as well as many museums and galleries in the United States.

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CAST BIOS

"I love that we have freedom of press in Kurdistan. I don't even mind that people write articles criticizing my governing... but my mother?" - Barham Salih, Prime Minister of Iraqi Kurdistan about his mother Runak Rauf and free press in Kurdistan Slemani, Christmas Eve - 2002.

RUNAK RAUF

In 1994, in the midst of a bitter civil war, Runak Khan Rauf, already in her 60's, led a march of women some 150 miles from Slemani to Erbil. She went straight to the newly elected parliament, bypassing the Kurdish tribal and party leaders, and shamed the men into ending the destructive. civil war.

She went on to help establish and direct The Women's Media Center in Slemani, which publishes *Rewan (Dawn)*, a newspaper on women's issues, for which Runak often writes and boldly speaks her mind, even when it opinions differ with her high profile political son Barham Salih, former Primer Minister of Kurdistan and until he resigned recently, Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq.

"My father raised me to be independent and educated," states Runak. "But when I was 17 years old, he married me off. He picked a liberated man - a judge, who allowed me to be independent. Still, I was careful to not interfere with my children's marriages. "

Runak Rauf continues in this mode. She is bold, brilliant and inspirational.

KALTHUM MURAD IBRAHIM

Kalthum, the daughter of a mullah, has a sixth grade education. After sixth grade, like many Iraqi Kurdish girls of her generation, she went home to help her mother with the house. As a mullah's daughter, helping people comes naturally to her. "People often came to my father for help," she says. Kalthum felt that her father raised his sons and daughters with equal rights. "He never treated me differently than my brothers," she says.

Kalthum is given great respect in Rania. One local official exclaims, "Kalthum knows the people here and works for them. She is better qualified for her job than many of the women leaders in Slemani." While this statement may reflect the sentiment of Rania officials about their own, it demonstrates the officials' opinion of Kalthum. She began her journalistic career as a volunteer for The Women's Media Center. She later joined the center as staff.

RUNAK FARAJ

"One of my students was murdered in an honor killing. That changed my whole life," says Runak Faraj, editor of *Rewan*, the Media Center's newspaper. "Our work is hard. We are facing problems that go back thousands of years." Runak Faraj has written several books and many articles on the problems women face in Iraqi Kurdistan. She also works in radio and television media in her efforts to bring Iraqi Kurdish women to a better place.

QUEST FOR HONOR
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FULL CREDIT LIST

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Production insurance provided by Film Emporium

HD Camera equipment supplied by Liman Video Rental, Co. NYC

Additional HD Camera equipment supplied by Abel Cine Tech New York

Additional Post Production Services provided by Final Frame

Archival Footage courtesy CNN

“Le Yel Jiabi”
From the album Galawij
Arranged and Performed by The Kamkars
Courtesy of The Kamkars

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