

KEYNOTE LECTURE: SABATINA JAMES

Sabatina James: Thank you for inviting me. So my name is Sabatina. I was born in Pakistan in 1982. My life in Pakistan was centered on the religion of Islam. My grandfather was a Muslim scholar. In past years more than 4000 women were burned alive in the name of Allah.

My father went to Austria. In my childhood I didn't see anyone who didn't believe in Allah. In 1992 he took us with him to Austria. For me, this was a culture shock. I had a neighbor named Rosie who was unmarried and the unmarried daughter had a child. I thought to myself, "why is this woman still alive, in Pakistan they would have killed her." I tried to stay away from this family and concentrate on school. When I turned 16 we moved to a bigger city and I attended a grammar school. I learned German and in the grammar school I specialized in music and acting. I always wanted to be a Bollywood princess.

My first problems started in school. I adopted the lifestyle of the Western classmates. I wanted to listen to BackStreet Boys. But in my mother's eyes my friends were prostitutes because they had boyfriends. I became two people. At school I was like my friends and at home I was Muslim. They told my mother, "your daughter is changing, she's wearing jeans with holes in them and hanging out with boys." My mother became suspicious. She checked my room and my bags. The stress was so much living in these two cultures that I would break down in the middle of class and cry. I knew my friends wouldn't understand me. My teacher asked me one day "are you crying for attention?" I also had a boyfriend, who was an exchange student. When my mom found out I had a boyfriend, she grabbed my hair, dragged me through the room and punched me in the face.

Physical punishment is normal in Pakistan. But sometimes I screamed when hit and my marks were visible. One day we had a teacher, and I wanted to talk to him about it, but I was afraid because I didn't want to harm my family or have the teachers harm my family. I told the teacher that my mom beat me, and he gave me a number for a shelter.

My aunt called me and told me she was ready to take me into her family. They said I could stay there. They also said they'd talk to my family. Then my father appeared. My father is an extremely good looking man. He

appeared there, and he didn't look like a radical Muslim.

My father said, Sabatina has every freedom she needs, she doesn't have to marry anyone she doesn't want. So they sent me back to my family after that meeting. I think the social workers, in their eyes I was a rebellious teenager. I think that's what they thought. They sent me home.

I released my book, "from Islam to Christianity " The book became a best seller. There were so many women from Pakistan saying that the men were cursing you while watching the TV. There were so many women that came to me in 2006, when I established my organization Sabatina. My father signed the marriage certificate himself. The embassy didn't ask me if I was married. No one asked me. So I was married without knowing it. I went to the police and said " I never married my cousin, it's my father's signature." So they were helping my cousin, but no one helped me. There's also an Iraqi girl, who was my best friend, who said, "maybe you should marry someone else."

So that's what I did. I married a man from the street who's Egyptian. Austria didn't help me, so I tried to help myself. I was called a polygamist. I didn't know what that was, so I called the police. I'm still married to my cousin without knowing it, my father admitted that to the courts. When my story was released, my father went to court and sued me.

My father didn't stop suing me. There are too many proofs in the book I wrote. I just want to say that these cases of honor killings don't just happen in Afghanistan. People who immigrate do not leave their culture at the airport. I know a Pakistani pastor, who tells a story of Coney Island that have the same situation.

With Sabatina, we are helping women in Germany. We're giving psychological help. We have a shelter that's our own shelter. We also go to schools where there are immigrants. If a girl comes up and says she has a problem in school we help. For example, there's a girl in Turkey, the school said she was supposed to marry. We helped her flee. This is not easy. Then her younger sister who is 16 had to marry the guy she didn't want. I wanted victim protection for her, but they said "forget it."

When you start with victim protection, don't involve people from Muslim background because they'll be loyal to their culture.

I hope this was useful to you all.

[APPLAUSE.]

Executive Director: Thank you. Any questions?

Female Speaker: Can you talk about the reaction of the Pakistani community to what happened? Did your family get support from them?

Sabatina James: For my father, it was difficult. When he went to mosque, there were all of these people telling him they saw me hanging around with boys. They said I was with Austrian prostitutes. When I refused to marry my cousin, many Pakistani families didn't want contact with my father.

One day, I went with my father to visit a family we knew for a long time. My father had sweets in his hand. He went to them to tell them I had been engaged. The guy opened the door. I knew his daughter. He said he didn't want sweets from my father.

For my father, it was very hard. The pressure on my family was extreme because of the context of the traditions of Islam. If you don't follow the traditions, you are cut off from a community. Sometimes, the family thinks the only way to go back to the community is to kill your daughter. They won't leave you in peace until you do that.

I'm not trying to justify people who kill their daughters. The guy said he didn't commit murder. He just protected his honor. For him, it was just protecting his honor and his family for being cut off from the community of Pakistan.

Female Speaker: Hi. I'm a social worker. I used to work in Coney Island. I worked for a psychiatric facility. I had support groups for people with certain problems. I'm asking you, if I were still in that position, how would you advise me to reach out to that community to be helpful in a preventative way?

Sabatina James: Well, the first thing is like Nazir Afzal said today. I'm afraid if I go on summer holiday that I will have to marry. You have to believe the girls. Holidays to hell. Sometimes, we come back married. You have to take

it very seriously.

It's also important to go to schools. That is where these girls are. That's where no one is watching them and looking at what they are doing. I wish I had someone in my school who could understand my culture.

One day, I had advice from my director. They told me to go to Mrs. Nadia. She taught Islam in our school. I went to her. I said I didn't want to marry. She told me my parents wanted what's best for me. And then, she called my father and invited us over for dinner. She had the whole family over. They became friends.

This is why I'm so suspicious when they think they solve problems by putting immigrants into social work. I didn't only experience that in the secondary school, but that was in the grammar school as well. A man taught us about the Quran. He said to me, look, these Christians have three gods. And then, if god doesn't have a wife, how can he have a child and call him the son of god? Nothing is holy to them.

This is what he's teaching me. He is sponsored by the Austrian government. I think it's hard to know who you can be loyal with and who you can't. Not all Muslims feel this way. It's hard to find out who is not thinking that way though.

Female Speaker: Thank you very much.

[Applause]