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## Thousands of Women Killed for Family "Honor"

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Hundreds, if not thousands, of women are murdered by their families each year in the name of family "honor." It's difficult to get precise numbers on the phenomenon of honor killing; the murders frequently go unreported, the perpetrators unpunished, and the concept of family honor justifies the act in the eyes of some societies.

Most honor killings occur in countries where the concept of women as a vessel of the family reputation predominates, said Marsha Freeman, director of International Women's Rights Action Watch at the Hubert Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota.

Reports submitted to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights show that honor killings have occurred in Bangladesh, Great Britain, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Pakistan, Morocco, Sweden, Turkey, and Uganda. In countries not submitting reports to the UN, the practice was condoned under the rule of the fundamentalist Taliban government in Afghanistan, and has been reported in Iraq and Iran.

But while honor killings have elicited considerable attention and outrage, human rights activists argue that they should be regarded as part of a much larger problem of violence against women.

In India, for example, more than 5,000 brides die annually because their dowries are considered insufficient, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Crimes of passion, which are treated extremely leniently in Latin America, are the same thing with a different name, some rights advocates say.

"In countries where Islam is practiced, they're called honor killings, but dowry deaths and so-called crimes of passion have a similar dynamic in that the women are killed by male family members and the crimes are perceived as excusable or understandable," said Widney Brown, advocacy director for Human Rights Watch.

The practice, she said, "goes across cultures and across religions."

Complicity by other women in the family and the community strengthens the concept of women as property and the perception that violence against family members is a family and not a judicial issue.

"Females in the family—mothers, mothers-in-law, sisters, and cousins—frequently support the attacks. It's a community mentality," said Zaynab Nawaz, a program assistant for women's human rights at Amnesty International.

### Women as Property

There is nothing in the Koran, the book of basic Islamic teachings, that permits or sanctions honor killings. However, the view of women as property with no rights of their own is deeply rooted in Islamic culture, Tahira Shahid Khan, a professor specializing in women's issues at the Aga Khan University in Pakistan, wrote in *Chained to Custom*, a review of honor killings published in 1999.

"Women are considered the property of the males in their family irrespective of their class, ethnic, or religious group. The owner of the property has the right to decide its fate. The concept of ownership has turned women into a commodity which can be exchanged, bought and sold."

Honor killings are perpetrated for a wide range of offenses. Marital infidelity, pre-marital sex, flirting, or even failing to serve a meal on time can all be perceived as impugning the family honor.

Amnesty International has reported on one case in which a husband murdered his wife based on a dream that she had betrayed him. In Turkey, a young woman's throat was slit in the town square because a love ballad had been dedicated to her over the radio.

In a society where most marriages are arranged by fathers and money is often exchanged, a woman's desire to choose her own husband—or to seek a divorce—can be viewed as a major act of defiance that damages the honor of the man who negotiated the deal.

Even victims of rape are vulnerable. In a widely reported case in March of 1999, a 16-year-old mentally retarded girl who was raped in the Northwest Frontier province of Pakistan was turned over to her tribe's judicial council. Even though the crime was reported to the police and the perpetrator was arrested, the Pathan tribesmen decided that she had brought shame to her tribe and she was killed in front of a tribal gathering.

The teenage brothers of victims are frequently directed to commit the murder because, as minors, they would be subject to considerably lighter sentencing if there is legal action. Typically, they would serve only three months to a year.

### **In the Name of Family Honor**

Officials often claim that nothing can be done to halt the practice because the concept of women's rights is not culturally relevant to deeply patriarchal societies.

"Politicians frequently argue that these things are occurring among uneducated, illiterate people whose attitudes can't be changed," said Brown. "We see it more as a matter of political will."

The story of Samia Imran is one of the most widely cited cases used to illustrate the vulnerability of women in a culture that turns a blind eye to such practices. The case's high profile no doubt arises from the fact that the murder took place in broad daylight, was abetted by the victim's mother, who was a doctor, and occurred in the office of Asma Jahangir, a prominent Pakistani lawyer and the UN reporter on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions.

In April 1999 Imran, a 28-year-old married woman seeking a divorce from her violent husband after 10 years of marriage, reluctantly agreed to meet her mother in a lawyers' office in Lahore, Pakistan. Imran's family opposed the divorce and considered her seeking a divorce to be shaming to the family's honor. Her mother arrived at the lawyer's office with a male companion, who immediately shot and killed Imran.

Imran's father, who was president of the Chamber of Commerce in Peshawar, filed a complaint with the police accusing the lawyers of the abduction and murder of Imran. The local clergy issued *fatwas* (religious rulings) against both women and money was promised to anyone who killed them.

The Peshawar High Court eventually threw out the father's suit. No one was ever arrested for Imran's death.

Imran's case received a great deal of publicity, but frequently honor killings are virtually ignored by community members. "In many cases, the women are buried in unmarked graves and all records of their existence are wiped out," said Brown.

Women accused by family members of bringing dishonor to their families are rarely given the opportunity to prove their innocence. In many countries where the practice is condoned or at least ignored, there are few shelters and very little legal protection.

"In Jordan, if a woman is afraid that her family wants to kill her, she can check herself into the local prison, but she can't check herself out, and the only person who can get her out is a male relative, who is frequently the person who poses the threat," said Brown.

"That this is their idea of how to protect women," Brown said, "is mind boggling."

### **Ending Violence Against Women**

Violence against women is being tackled at the international level as a human rights issue. In 1994 the UN's Commission on Human Rights appointed a special rapporteur on violence against women, and both UNICEF and the UN Development Fund for Women have programs in place to address the issue.

But the politics of women's rights can be complex. Last year the special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions was criticized by a coalition of member countries for including honor killings in her report, and a resolution condemning honor killings failed to pass.

Amnesty International is preparing to launch a worldwide campaign to halt violence against women in 2003.

But a lot of the work needs to be done at the local level.

"Police officers and prosecutors need to be convinced to treat these crimes seriously, and countries need to review their criminal codes for discrimination against women—where murder of a wife is treated more leniently than murder of a husband, for instance," said Brown.

Countries that don't recognize domestic violence as a crime at all need to bring their penal codes up to international standards, she said, adding that increased public awareness and greater education about human rights would also help.

Some progress has been made.

In a National Geographic documentary (which airs beginning Wednesday, February 13), Michael Davie investigated honor killings in Pakistan, where it is estimated that every day at least three women—including victims of rape—are victims of the practice.

The case of one of the victims Davie examined is heartbreaking but also hopeful. Zahida Perveen, a 29-year-old mother of three, was brutally disfigured and underwent extensive facial reconstruction in the United States. She is one of the only survivors in Pakistan to successfully prosecute the attacker—her husband.

"The reason honor killings have emerged as a human rights issue is that it's the only way ultimately that it can be addressed," said Freeman. "Naming the problem and bringing international attention to it highlights the refusal of some of these governments to shine any kind of light on their failure to protect their own citizens.

"Change can't happen if it's just people working inside the system; they're overwhelmed. International campaigns and media attention give them some ballast and the ability to say 'Look, the world is watching what is going on here,' and provides support for making change in their own countries."

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## "Honor" Killings

Culture of Discrimination: A Fact Sheet on "Honor" Killings

[Honor Killings fact sheet \(PDF\)](#)

Ankara, Turkey—Ignoring the pleas of his 14-year-old daughter to spare her life, Mehmet Halitogullari pulled on a wire wrapped around her neck and strangled her—supposedly to restore the family's honor after she was kidnapped and raped... "I decided to kill her because our honor was dirtied," the newspaper Sabah quoted the father as saying. "I didn't listen to her pleas, I wrapped the wire around her neck and pulled at it until she died" (The Associated Press).

Every year around the world an increasing number of women are killed in the name of "honor." Relatives, usually male, commit acts of violence against wives, sisters, daughters and mothers to reclaim their family honor from real or suspected actions that are perceived to have compromised it. Due to discriminatory societal beliefs and extremist views of gender, officials often condone or ignore the use of torture and brutality against women. As a result, the majority of so-called honor killings go unreported and perpetrators face little, if any, consequence.

Although "/women/honor" killings are widely reported in regions throughout the Middle East and South Asia, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary and Arbitrary Executions reported that these crimes against women occur in countries as varied as Bangladesh, Brazil, Ecuador, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Sweden, Turkey, Uganda and the United Kingdom. The United Nations Population Fund estimates that the annual world-wide number of "honor" killing victims is 5000 women.<sup>1</sup> In a study of female murders in Alexandria, Egypt, 47% of the women were killed after the woman had been raped. In Jordan and Lebanon, 70-75% of the perpetrators of these "honor" killings are the women's brothers.<sup>2</sup>

### The Concept of Honor

So-called honor killings are based on the belief, deeply rooted in some cultures, of women as objects and commodities, not as human beings endowed with dignity and rights equal to those of men. Women are considered the property of male relatives and are seen to embody the honor of the men to whom they "belong." Women's bodies are considered the repositories of family honor. The concepts of male status and family status are of particular importance in cultures where "honor" killings occur and where women are viewed as responsible for upholding a family's "honor." If a woman or girl is accused or suspected of engaging in behavior that could taint male and/or family status, she may face brutal retaliation from her relatives that often results in violent death. Even though such accusations are not based on factual or tangible evidence, any allegation of dishonor against a woman often suffices for family members to take matters into their own hands.

Convicted killers often speak with defiant pride and without regret about their actions. "We do not consider this murder," said Wafik Abu Abseh, a 22-year-old Jordanian woodcutter who committed a so-called honor killing, as his mother, brother and sisters nodded in agreement. "It was like cutting off a finger." Abdel Rahim, a convicted killer who was released after two months, also said he had no regrets. "Honor is more precious than my own flesh and blood" (New York Times).

International Human Rights Foundations

**Article 1 of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women** proclaims "the term 'violence against women' means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."

**The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination of All Forms Against Women (CEDAW)** concludes that "...State Parties [should] take all appropriate measures [...] to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices [...] and all other practices which are based on the idea of inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women."

~~CEDAW General Recommendation 19 clarifies that traditional public and private ideologies that regard women as "subordinate to men" and seek to "justify gender-based violence as a form of protection or control" deprive women of mental and bodily integrity.~~

~~The Platform for Action on Women's Human Rights from the UN Fourth World Conference on Women calls upon states to "take urgent action to combat and eliminate violence against women, which is a human rights violation resulting from harmful traditional or customary practices, cultural prejudices and extremism."~~

~~The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) asserts that "every human being has the inherent right to life" in addition to "the right to liberty and security of person."~~

### **What can precipitate an "honor" killing?**

Women and girls can be killed for a variety of behaviors, which may include talking with an unrelated male, consensual sexual relations outside marriage, being a victim of rape, seeking a divorce, or refusing to marry the man chosen by one's family. Even the suspicion of a transgression may result in a killing. Al received a report of a man who killed his wife on the basis of a dream he had about her committing adultery. Women have been killed for ostensibly disrespecting their husbands. In one case, a woman was beaten to death for not performing her domestic duties quickly enough. Women may also be assaulted physically but not killed. When they attempt to seek help from law enforcement, they may be disbelieved or they may be discredited by officials who support the prevailing cultural expectations for women. Some countries have passed laws that allow lesser penalties for men who kill "in the name of family honor". In others, the police may be bribed by the family of the killer to ignore attempts to report the killing as a murder.

*In 1999, twenty-nine year old Samia Sarwar was shot dead in her lawyer's office in Lahore. Her parents instigated the murder, feeling that Samia had brought shame on the family by seeking divorce after 10 years of marital abuse. Although the perpetrators can be easily identified, not one of them has been arrested. Instead, her lawyer, Hina Jilani, and her colleague, Asma Jahangir, have been publicly condemned and received death threats.*

### **Religious, Social and Institutional Justifications for "Honor" Killings**

So-called honor crimes occur in societies in which there is interplay between discriminatory tribal traditions of justice and statutory law. In some countries this is exacerbated by inclusion of Shari'a, or Islamic law, or the concept of zina (sex outside of marriage) as a crime within statutory law. Due to women's enforced seclusion, submission to men and second-class citizenship, women seldom know their rights under national or international law, and rarely have a chance to defend themselves in a court of law. Local law enforcement officials often turn a blind eye or fail to enforce significant punishments for the murder of women. In Pakistan, for example, a woman may be imprisoned if convicted of zina. In the parallel tribal justice systems of Pakistan, a woman may be killed for actual or suspected sex outside of marriage. Police and members of the public may help the killer's family cover up the murder by refusing to register it as a crime, or by delaying long enough to allow the killer to escape the vicinity. For example, under both Jordanian and Pakistani law, women are expected to meet impossible requirements for "corroborating evidence" in order to prove allegations of rape. Even if a woman meets these requirements, evidence of previous sexual activity may be admitted in proceedings and lead to her being charged with zina. In both Jordan and Pakistan, any form of perceived "immorality," whether adultery or rape, is considered a way of dishonoring the family and may lead to "honor" related violence.

### **Communal Aspect of "Honor" Killings**

So-called honor killings are part of a community mentality. Large sections of society share traditional conceptions of family honor and approve of "honor" killings to preserve that honor. Even mothers whose daughters have been killed in the name of honor often condone such violent acts. Such complicity by other women in the family and the community strengthens the concept of women as

property without personal worth. In addition, communal acceptance of "honor" killings furthers the claim that violence in the name of "honor" is a private issue and one to be avoided by law enforcement. Community acceptance of these killings stifles accurate reporting of the number of violent crimes against women in the name of "honor." As a result, the true extent of the prevalence of "honor" killings is still not fully known.

~~"It is an unholy alliance that works against women: the killers take pride in what they have done, the tribal leaders condone the act and protect the killers and the police connive the cover-up." Nighat Taufeeq of the women's resource center Shirkatgah (Lahore, Pakistan):~~

~~The murder of women in the name of "honor" is a gender-specific form of discrimination and violence. In societies where so-called honor killings are allowed to occur, governments are failing in their responsibility to protect and ensure women their human rights. "Honor" killings should be regarded as part of a larger spectrum of violence against women, as well as a serious human rights violation. Amnesty International calls on you to help bring an end to "honor" killings, and to demand that governments take steps to ensure that women and men enjoy equal treatment under law.~~