FOR THE SAKE OF HONOUR: BUT WHOSE HONOUR?

“HONOUR CRIMES” AGAINST WOMEN

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1. Introduction

Her brother in Joharabad, Punjab, set Ghazala on fire, on 6 January 1999. According to reports, she was murdered because her family suspected she was having an ‘illicit’ relationship with a neighbour. Her burnt and naked body reportedly lay unattended on the street for two hours, as nobody wanted to have anything to do with it.

Ghazala was burned to death in the name of honour. Hundreds of other women and girls suffer a similar fate every year amid general public support and little or no action by the authorities. In fact, there is every sign that the number of honour killings is on the rise, as the perception of what constitutes honour and what damages it widens, and as more murders take on the guise of honour killings on the accurate assumption that they are rarely punished.

This article endeavours to answer questions on this negative social behaviour which have recently engulfed the minds of many, especially in light of its increase in occurrence. These are queries such as: What are honour crimes? Whose honour is at stake? What steps are being taken to curb them? What is the extent to which they are prevalent in Islamic states, as well as Western states and others such as India?¹ And where finally does the problem lie?

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¹ India has been researched separately because the cases of domestic violence and other customs such as sati, dowry-death etc. have been recognized by the UN as honour crimes in India while in other countries the kinds of crimes and the reasons for murder are different.
2. What are Honour Crimes?

‘Honour killing’ is an ancient practice in which men kill female relatives in the name of family ‘honour’ for forced or suspected sexual activity outside marriage, even when they have been victims of rape. It is considered to be culturally sanctioned homicidal violence directed at women and girls around the world.²

Each year, male family members murder thousands of girls and women across the globe (although mostly centered in the Middle East) in the name of family honour. Honour killings are executed for instances of rape, infidelity, flirting or any other instance perceived as disgracing the family’s honour, and the woman is then killed by a male relative to restore the family’s name in the community. Many women are killed based on the suspicions of a family member and are not given the chance to defend themselves. The allegation alone is enough to defile a man’s or family’s honour and is therefore enough to justify the killing of the woman. The men who commit the murder typically go unpunished or receive reduced sentences.³

Thousands of women and girls are stabbed, burned or maimed every year by husbands, fathers or brothers who believe they have brought dishonour by being unfaithful, seeking a divorce, eloping with a boyfriend or refusing to marry a man the family has chosen. When the victims do not survive, the crime becomes an “honour killing”, a term that has come to symbolize the cruel irony of a conservative Islamic society that purports to shelter women, yet often condones savage violence against them in the name of male and family honour.

Such crimes occur in countries across the world and among societies of all faiths; a jealous husband in the United States may be driven to the same acts of violent rage as one in Pakistan or Portugal, but such attacks tend to be taken more seriously by authorities in developed countries where women are more educated about their rights. Moreover, because the concepts of male honour and female subservience are deeply ingrained in both Islamic and Asian tribal cultures, honour crimes, including murder, have occurred for years in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and other Muslim countries, as well as Pakistan, without arousing widespread opprobrium or outcry. While the concept of honour killing does not exist in Islamic law,

²Source:  http://www.omct.org
³ Source:  http://www.womenissues.about.com/cs/honorkillings/a/honorkillings.htm