

NO HONOUR IN MURDER

The majority of Asian women live in fear. They face death by shooting, burning or killing with axes if they are deemed to have brought shame on their family through various and usually unjust ways. More hurtful still is that these cruel acts of murder are carried out by the men closest to them, usually their father, husband or brother. The lives of these women are restricted by traditions which enforce these extreme crimes, known globally as Honour Killings. Most honour killings of women occur in Muslim countries and are recognised as the practice of a family member killing a female relative when she has been considered to have brought dishonour to the family, however sometimes only through general accusation. Such “immoral behaviour” may take the form of marital infidelity, refusing to submit to an arranged marriage, seeking a divorce - even from an abusive husband and almost ironically being the victim of a sexual assault.

Honour killings are a widespread problem as every year hundreds of women are known to die as a result of them and due to recent media attention, the problem has come under increasing global scrutiny, however little has been done about it as many more cases go unreported and almost go unpunished. The isolation and fear of women living under such threats are compounded by state indifference to and complicity in women’s oppression. It seems as though there is a particular discrimination against women as police almost invariably take the men’s side and rarely prosecute the killers. Even when the men are convicted the jury ensures that they usually receive a light sentence, reinforcing the view that men can kill their female relatives with virtual impunity. This ideal must be abolished before justice is brought to these immoral cultural practices.

Because honour killings reflect long standing traditions, the situation must be treated delicately to maintain a level of respect for different cultures and religions. Women are viewed on one hand as fragile creatures that need protection and on the other hand as evil from whom society needs protection. This tradition casts the male as the sole protector of the female so he must have total control of her. If this protection is violated, he loses honour because either he failed to protect her or he failed to bring her up correctly. Clearly, the vulnerability of women around the world to this type of violence will only be reduced when these mindsets are challenged and effectively confronted. This seems ridiculous in a modern age where women’s rights should be equal to men’s in all religions and cultures, and wrongly this is not always the case.

Another harsh factor of honour killings which adds to the obvious discrimination against women in these cultures is that the male involved in a sexual activity which might have been rape or relations

with members of external ethnic groups in general are not adversely affected. The execution of the female relative is considered to be a private matter within the affected family and the issue remains largely hidden from public view.

Violence against women is a worldwide problem which manifests itself differently according to societies and cultures. The threat of violence permeates every aspect of these women's lives. The flimsiest of suspicions can lead to murder - a rumour spread, an accusation by a jealous husband, or in some extreme cases a man's dream of his wife's adultery. Furthermore, women are not even given a chance to explain or to clear up any possible misunderstandings. Tradition dictates only one way to resolve honour: killing the offending woman. And it's this tradition that is the main cause of women's social discrimination in these cultures and the result of so many murders. The tradition derives from expectations of female behaviour that are held and perpetuated by men and the women's role has often been underappreciated. Male relatives virtually own them and punish contraventions of their proprietary control with violence.

Even though the beginnings of women's rights awareness start to seep into the secluded world of women, the response is harsh and immediate; it results in the increase of honour killings. So it seems as if there will be no end to these cruel and unjust crimes and obvious unfair discrimination against women. The phrase 'no way out' is true both theoretically and practically for there are few women's shelters and the harsh reality is that for most women the only option is suicide. The problem of honour killings is not a problem of morality or of ensuring that women maintain their own virtue, but a problem of domination, power and hatred towards women who in these instances are viewed as nothing more than servants to the family, both physically and symbolically. These women should be allowed the right to freedom like every other human being today and should not have to be forced into what they don't want to do with a consequence of murder. **Why** should these men be playing God? **Who** gives them the right to murder women whose only crime was to follow their heart or in some shocking cases "allowing" rape? I don't think there is any woman on this earth who would allow herself to be sexually assaulted and they are being reduced of the most fundamental human rights, the rights to life and freedom from torture and ill-treatment.

However, some argue that we should be able to recognise cultural diversity and in Pakistan, honour crimes are justified in the name of tradition. But these traditions themselves have become distorted and corrupted to allow for widespread abuse. Some argue that they don't want to encourage women who break up the family, but equally how about the men? **What** justice is brought to these rapists and murderers?

The government of Pakistan has taken no measures to end honour killings and to prosecute the offenders. They should in fact be viewed as co-conspirators in such crimes. It has failed to train police and judges to be gender neutral and to amend discriminatory laws. 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. Because there is the correct assumption that these murderers are rarely punished, the number of honour killings increase yet again. In the UK the police are concerned about the high proportion of honour killings which end in convictions for manslaughter rather than murder. What is amazing is the number of Asian countries where this is still legal. Women and girls are dying at the hands of their husbands, fathers and brothers while the authorities pay no attention to their obligations to protect them.

I believe that action to start treating and judging the men who commit these crimes as the murderers they are, and to protect the victims as they deserve to be protected is needed as soon as possible. Honour killings are a complicated issue that cuts deep into the history of Asian society and confronting this problem requires a change in attitude about these unjust beliefs. Muslim leaders can provide an important example to their followers and all reports of honour killings should be investigated and prosecuted. Extensive public awareness programs should also be carried out to inform all cultures of women's equal rights. In particular, the juries should be trained to address complaints of violence committed in the name of honour. There has to be real commitment to bring justice to these unacceptable crimes and to those who commit these crimes, something must be done. The right to life of these innocent women in Asia should not be conditional on their obeying of traditions and they should be able to live without fear.