

Three victims of acid attacks in Bangladesh, where visual aesthetics are highly prized and facial disfigurement can be used by husbands as legal grounds for divorce. Rejection of romantic advances or dissatisfaction with dowry are the main motivation behind these crimes, which are especially prevalent in South Asia.

Image: Brent Stirton

crimes of “honour”

In many societies around the globe, women and girls are the repository of family and community honour and held liable for infractions against that reputation regardless of their guilt or innocence. Unsubstantiated rumours of a woman or girl acting “inappropriately” can lead to — and then be used to justify — extreme punitive measures. Even in cases of rape, codes of honour very often dictate that the victim be punished.

A culturally condoned atrocity

A young Bangladeshi woman was flogged to death by order of village clerics for “immoral behaviour”.¹ An Egyptian man paraded the head of his daughter on a stick through the streets of his neighbourhood after he killed her for besmirching his name.² A teenager’s throat was slit in Turkey because a love ballad was dedicated to her over the radio.³ A Pakistani woman was gunned down by her own family in the presence of her human rights lawyer for pursuing a divorce from her abusive husband.⁴ A 13-year-old Turkish girl’s husband slit her throat in a public square after pulling her out of a cinema and accusing her of being a prostitute.⁵ A 35-year-old Jordanian man shot and killed his sister for reporting to the police that she had been raped.⁶ A Turkish girl was killed by her father for telling the authorities that she had been raped and then refusing his demand that she marry the rapist.⁷ A 29-year-old woman was dragged from her house in Afghanistan by her husband and

local officials and stoned to death for committing adultery, while the man with whom she was alleged to have had an affair was whipped and then freed.⁸

Each of these executions was committed within the past five years in the name of “honour”. Many of the perpetrators received no criminal penalties; others served only short sentences. Considered justifiable punishment for a wide range of perceived offences, contemporary honour crimes are based on archaic codes of social conduct that severely circumscribe female behaviour while at the same time legitimising male violence against women.

Honour crimes are typically engineered by male family members but are often tacitly or explicitly condoned by the community and/or the state. In many countries the responsibility for the murder itself is

assigned to an underage male, thus ensuring a (reduced) juvenile sentence in the event the case is prosecuted. In most instances, the murderer is hailed as a “true man”.⁹ It is also not unheard of for female family members to act as accomplices to the killing or even to carry out the murder itself.

Global prevalence

In recent reports, both the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Violence Against Women and the Special Rapporteur for Extrajudicial and Summary Executions have highlighted this egregious type of violence against women, citing incidents in Bangladesh, Turkey, Jordan, Israel, India, Italy, Pakistan, Brazil, Ecuador, Uganda, Morocco, Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Iran and Yemen, as well as among migrant communities in Germany, France, Sweden and the United Kingdom.¹⁰ Honour crimes also have been reported in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹¹

The actual scale of the problem is impossible to determine. In many cases deaths are not registered; in others murders are made to look like suicides, or women are forced or induced by their families to kill themselves.¹² Burns or acid attacks not resulting in death often are attributed to accidents, a claim which victims may not refute for fear of further reprisals. In societies where these crimes occur, protection and support are often extended to the perpetrator rather than to the victim.

Despite the lack of reliable statistical data, estimates based on reviews of police reports and court dockets, newspaper articles and other sources in

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a variety of countries suggest that thousands of women and girls are murdered each year in the name of honour. Anecdotal evidence from Pakistan, for example, suggests that more than 1,000 women are victims of honour crimes annually.¹³ Over one-third of femicides in Jordan are thought to be such killings.¹⁴ In Turkey, an annual report of the Human Rights Association concluded that more than half of women killed by family members in 2003 were victims of honour crimes.¹⁵

In 1997, the former attorney general of the Palestinian National Authority suggested that 70 percent of all murders of women in Gaza

and the West Bank were honour crimes.¹⁶ In the same year, as many as 400 honour killings took place in Yemen, and 57 were reported in Egypt.¹⁷ In late 2004, 117 murders in the United Kingdom were being investigated as possible honour killings.¹⁸ In Lebanon, 36 honour crimes were reported between 1996 and 1998.¹⁹

According to the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, the number of honour killings “is on the rise as the perception of what constitutes honour and what damages it widens.”²⁰ Its global prevalence suggests that honour crimes are not unique to specific cultures, religions or classes. In fact, the justification for these crimes has its roots in various social and legal systems around the world.

Honour or subjugation?

In the broadest sense, honour crimes involve the murder or maiming of a woman or girl whose behaviour is at odds (whether in fact or by perception) with the norms of the society in which she lives. In many cases the cause of the woman’s actions — even if she is under extreme duress or in fear of her life — is immaterial if her family feels that she has compromised their supposed honour. The inherent subjectivity of such notions of honour opens these codes to wide and convenient interpretation. At the most basic level, “what masquerades as honour is really men’s need to control women’s sexuality and freedom.”²¹

According to Thaira Shahid Khan, the author of *Chained to Custom*, “Women are considered the property of the males and 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.”²² That perception also means that women are expendable when their actions, real or imagined, threaten a family’s sense of honour.

While honour crimes are most prevalent in Muslim and some Mediterranean cultures, the popular conflation of Islam with such acts is misguided: Islamic scholars and clerics alike have publicly decried the practice, confirming that it has no basis in Islamic scripture or teachings.²³ Nevertheless, in traditional Muslim societies, concerns about shame and honour may take precedence over individual human rights and freedoms. One contention is that honour crimes have their

Young women share a dormitory-style room at a women's prison in Herat, Afghanistan. Many of them have run away from forced marriages or been accused of committing adultery. One of the girls at the facility, "Ramia", had been sent there for tarnishing the honour of her family, who claimed that they had not given consent for their 15-year-old to marry — even though Ramia's father had chosen his son-in-law two years before the marriage. To separate the couple and punish his daughter, Ramia's father arranged for the police to arrest her and put her in prison. "Halima", another 15-year-old girl at the facility, was accused by her brother-in-law of killing the 60-year-old husband she had been forced to marry.

Image: Evelyn Hockstein/IRIN

Sixty percent of “Rabisa’s” body was severely burned in punishment for challenging the authority of her husband, who had forbidden her to go to her mother’s house to take an overseas call from her uncle. When Rabisa and her mother insisted she be allowed to speak with her uncle, Rabisa’s husband threw his mother-in-law out of his house and knocked his wife against a wall, breaking her nose. He then poured kerosene over Rabisa and set her alight.

Rescued by her mother, Rabisa survived an excruciating recovery process. She continues to have trouble breathing through her nose, and her vision has deteriorated because her burned eyelids can no longer protect her eyes. Rabisa cannot wear glasses to correct this: Her ears melted away while her body was on fire.

origins in the Arabic expression “A man’s honour lies between the legs of a woman.”²⁴ In Turkish, the term *namus* is used to describe honour. A woman’s *namus* is primarily defined through her sexuality, her physical appearance and her behaviour, a man’s *namus* is achieved through the sexual purity of his wife, daughters or sisters.²⁵

Others contend that current justifications for crimes of honour are the result of colonial influences, including both Napoleonic and British codes that cite provocation as an exonerating or mitigating factor in criminal assault.²⁶ Indeed, the concept of provocation in “crimes of passion” between men and women — where women are held accountable for inciting men to violence — has tenacious roots in many societies across the world. As recently as 1999, an American man was sentenced to only four months in prison for murdering his wife and wounding her lover in the presence of their 10-year-old son.²⁷

In Sindh, Pakistan, honour crimes take the form of *karo-kari* killings. *Karo* literally means a “black man” and *kari* means a “black woman”. Having brought dishonour to their families through adultery or other “inappropriate” behaviour, the customary punishment for both *karo* and *kari* is death. In practice, however, the *kari* woman is usually killed first, giving the *karo* man an opportunity to flee. Following the woman’s punishment, the man may be able to negotiate a truce with the dishonoured family by paying financial compensation and/or by replacing the woman who was killed with a woman from his own family.²⁸

In some instances, reputed *karo-kari* killings can serve as pretence for economic gain. In fact, evidence suggests that faked honour killings often conceal other crimes: Men murder other men for reasons not associated with honour and then execute a woman of their own family to camouflage the initial killing. Some experts believe that honour crimes also are used to cover up misdeeds such as rape, incest, adultery, unlawful or undesired pregnancies and for inheritance purposes.²⁹ In Jordan, for example, investigators surmise that a substantial portion of the 20 to 35 honour killings documented each year are the result of other motives.³⁰

An ever-present threat

In settings where honour killings are prevalent, the constant threat against women and girls is yet another form of violence, aptly described

in the Pakistani poet Attiya Dawood’s rendering of the daily experience of a young Pakistani girl: “My brother’s eyes forever follow me. My father’s gaze guards me all the time, stern, angry ... We stand accused and condemned to be declared *kari* and murdered.”³¹

For some women, this threat leads to suicide, whether or not a family orders it. One young woman in Pakistan, for example, laid herself across a train track after being pressured by her parents to marry a man she did not choose.³² Other women and girls may be forced to undergo virginity exams — an often painful and degrading process — and are still killed despite medical verification of their chastity.³³

Whether or not the threat of violence actually results in murder, the risk of being killed results in the virtual death of many women, whose only option, in the absence of adequate protective services, is to enter prisons or other custodial facilities. In Jordan, for example, police imprison potential victims to protect them from being killed by their male relatives. While those who threaten them remain free, victims languish in custody for years on end. In some societies, women are not released from custody until a relative signs for their discharge. Too often, a

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woman or girl who is handed over to relatives who promise to protect her is immediately killed by them. In one instance, Jordanian police returned a 36-year-old woman to her father’s home after he had consented not to hurt her. He shot her while the police were still downstairs, and his punishment was one month in prison.³⁴

Evidence suggests that there is a great demand for services, including shelters, for abused women. But even where shelters are available, there is often little they can provide in terms of concrete assistance because of the limited rights and opportunities afforded to women by the prevailing culture. Moreover, shelter workers, human rights activists, journalists and lawyers are at risk of being targeted by angry families and communities.³⁵

Police rarely investigate honour crimes, and the handful of perpetrators who are arrested often receive only token punishments. In some settings police may overtly or covertly champion the killers as vindicated men. Elsewhere, police act within a network of conspirators who benefit economically from honour killings.³⁶ Many countries where such crimes

are commonplace have retained legislation allowing reduced sentences or exemption from prosecution for those who commit honour crimes.³⁷

In Pakistan, for example, an ordinance gives the heirs of a murder victim the right to pardon the murderer. Since family members most often are complicit in honour killings, many perpetrators go free.³⁸ Specific articles in the Jordanian penal code offer similar protection.³⁹ In Brazil, men alleging adultery may also go free. In one such case, a man stabbed his wife and her lover to death after catching them in a hotel room. The case was appealed three times, and each time the jury acquitted the defendant. Such defences are found to varying degrees in the penal codes of Peru, Bangladesh, Argentina, Ecuador, Egypt, Guatemala, Iran, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, the West Bank and Venezuela.⁴⁰

Taking action against honour crimes

The work of local and international activists is bringing gradual pressure to bear in many of the countries where honour crimes are most prevalent. Turkey, for example, has taken steps to conform its legislation to international standards. In 2003 and 2004, three defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes of honour. Real change, however, takes time. In another case in 2004, the 24-year sentence of a man convicted of killing his wife was commuted to two years after he presented to the court pictures of his wife with another man.⁴¹ In Pakistan, intensive pressure on the government has resulted in the drafting of legislation against honour crimes, which has yet to be formally presented to parliament.⁴²

A grassroots campaign against honour killing in Jordan gathered some 15,000 signatures on a petition to repeal an article in the penal code that pardons honour crimes that are the result of a wife committing adultery. In 2001, a temporary amendment was passed precluding exoneration based on adultery, although it retained adultery as a mitigating circumstance. To date, ratification of the amendment is still pending, and parliamentary resistance to the legislation is apparently strong in some conservative quarters.

One Jordanian member of parliament who opposed repealing the law on honour crimes opined, "Women adulterers cause a great threat to our society because they are the main reasons that such acts take place. ... If men do not find women with whom to commit adultery, then they will become good on their own."⁴³

There are differing opinions about the best ways to address the problem of honour crimes. Some argue that any local efforts must be supported by the international community, while others express concern that intensive media coverage by the international press — Western press, in particular — may generate a backlash that undermines the important work of local activists.⁴⁴ Similarly, education programmes in some local communities about the tenets of Islam that proscribe honour crimes have

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been valuable in mobilising against the practice. Project workers elsewhere, however, have found that invoking the Qur'an has not proven useful in denouncing violence. They favour promoting traditional preventive practices of family dialogue to support mediation and reconciliation.⁴⁵

Most parties agree, however, that eradication strategies must support the implementation of protective laws. Tunisia is an example where legislative reform has had considerable success. Historically, several provisions in Tunisian law reduced criminal penalties for perpetrators of honour killings. Derived from the Napoleonic code and influenced by colonial history, these provisions held wives, but not husbands, criminally liable for adulterous behaviour and stipulated significantly reduced penalties for murderous husbands who caught their wives in an act of adultery. Reforms in both these provisions were accomplished in the last three decades with little debate or dissent from the Muslim leaders or populace.⁴⁶ Notably, there have been no documented cases of honour crimes in Tunisia in the last twenty years.⁴⁷

Most activists also agree that efforts must be vastly but incrementally increased to promote shifts in community perceptions about gender roles, rights and responsibilities. Such initiatives may be slow-paced, but the goals are nonetheless radical: "In the end, honour killings will only be eradicated when power over women is not seen as central to a man's self-respect, and domination of women and girls is not seen as reassuring social glue."⁴⁸ At that point, there will be no more "honour" in killing wives, sisters and mothers. ■

Hospitals in Asia treat a disproportionately high number of female burn victims. Whether the burns are caused by acid attacks, deliberate immolation (often called “kitchen-stove accidents”) or self-immolation, they are often linked to issues of honour — and the perpetrators are usually the victims’ in-laws or husbands. The nurse who cared for the patient in this photo suspected that the woman’s burns were related to the fact that she is unable to have children.

Image: Evelyn Hockstein/IRIN



These images are from the funeral of Zubeda Bibi, age 60, who was murdered by her son-in-law and his friend. Zubeda's daughter, Shenaz, was married at age 14 to Adil Kamal, a considerably older man. After having two children with him, Shenaz discovered that her husband already had a wife and six other children in another part of the country. Upon learning that Adil had another family, Shenaz asked him for a divorce. He refused. Zubeda tried to pressure her son-in-law to at least give more support to her daughter and share some of his property with Shenaz's children. Adil's response to her questioning his authority — thus bringing shame on him — was to return from work one night in March 2005 and slit his mother-in-law's throat.

Images: Evelyn Hockstein/IRIN



“Sadia” lives in one of the few protective shelters available to women in Pakistan. Her story is not unlike that of many other young women who resort to protective confinement under the threat of honour killing. Sadia, who ran away from her parents after they forbade her to marry the boy of her choosing, was arrested along with her boyfriend and put in jail. Sadia’s father bribed the police with 20,000 rupees to beat his daughter into submitting a statement against her boyfriend, which in turn would preserve the family honour. Sadia continually refused to make a statement and finally was released into her aunt’s care. Her boyfriend remained in jail. Eight days after Sadia’s release, her parents persuaded her to marry another man — the only way she would be assured that her boyfriend, who remained in jail, would be freed. Three months into her marriage, Sadia ran away to her boyfriend’s house. Fearing for her life, she entered the shelter. Sadia intends to remain there until she and her boyfriend can devise a safe escape from her family.

