

Honour Killing': myths and realities

Human Rights
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"Honour killing" under different names is a global phenomenon, claiming the lives of thousands of women around the world every year. The justification is usually that the targeted woman has engaged in illicit sexual relations, been raped, refused an arranged marriage or asked for divorce. The act is generally committed by men seeking to restore the lost image or "honour" of their family or community.

Although widely believed to be an Islamic tradition as it occurs mostly in Muslim countries particularly where tribal systems prevail, this inhuman practice has nothing to do with religion, but is rooted in cultural or tribal practices and the psychological phenomenon behind so-called tarnished "honour".

Islam is a complete code of life based on the Qur'an and Sunnah. The male, female relationship is clearly defined and the punishments for adultery are based on clearly laid-out principles. No one is allowed to take the law into their own hands. It is the court that has to decide the punishment for any crime.

Islamic jurisprudence does not define the death penalty for adultery except for married persons, and only then when the sexual act has been seen by four eye-witnesses. The punishments for false allegations are also defined clearly, with no distinction between man and woman. These punishments are to uphold the morality of the social system and to discourage the sin rather than to uphold the "honour" of a family or community.

Such killings are known in Europe and the Western world as crimes of passion, and are, or have been, common in the Greek and Latin communities. However, the phenomenon is rising with the migration of families from developing coun-

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tries bringing their tribal cultures and traditional values with them.

Closer to home, activists in India are calling for a change in the country's law to counter the rise of such killings, particularly in the case of women marrying into lower castes or lower socio-economic status.

Such killings in Pakistan are known as *karo kari*, *siya kari* or having been executed in the name of *ghairat* or "honour". Over 1000 such cases are reported a year, and the actual occurrence of this crime is estimated to be far greater. It tends to be more prevalent in areas with high illiteracy, and where there is gender discrimination in general, and where great premium is placed on prestige.

The motives behind many such cases have been found to be property or debt, besides ignorance, superstition, social pressure and perceptions of "honour". In one reported case, a man killed his wife after having a dream in which she was unfaithful to him. Many killings are only based on suspicion without providing women a chance to defend themselves. Rape victims are sometimes declared *kali* or *kari*, and killed to restore the "lost honour" of families or tribes.

Legislation, mass awareness and elimination of social pressure are prerequisites for deterring "honour killings". The Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill 2004 against "honour killings" in the National Assembly (adopted last October) is a small step in this direction. It aims to eliminate procedural hassles and increase punishment in "honour" related crimes and killing committed in the name of "honour" that is treated as premeditated murder according to the amended law. Women's rights activists have called for punishment also to those who abet, encourage and conspire or validate the commissioning of "honour killing". This suggestion must also be taken into account.

Mass awareness and removal of misguided beliefs and distorted views on what constitutes a family's honour are as important as legislation. The Sardars, Chaudharys, Maliks and Khans who decide the cases and the Ulema who advocate Islamic jurisprudence can play an important role to condemn these traditional values and cultural heritage. Some Sardars including the Jamalis of Balochistan have offered protection to any woman facing a threat to her life for this reason.

A nationwide campaign to end "honour killing" has been initiated by non-government organisations, facilitated by Oxfam. It is evolving a combination of provincial and national level alliances bringing together bar associations, media groups, government institutions, local government, human rights organizations and activists, NGOs, CBOs, and legislators through seminars and other activities even in remote areas. Such efforts counter the pressure on men who believe that they must kill a woman to restore their lost "honour".

Killing is the worst form of violence, and such killings flout all principles of humanity, rational thinking and justice. Society must have zero tolerance for "honour killings", which are simply murder by any other name. There is nothing brave or valorous about such murders, particularly if we understand the true spirit of Islam and the dignity that it has bestowed on women.

The writer recently participated in a seminar in Balochistan on 'honour killings' organized by Journalists for Democracy and Human Rights, Pakistan and runs www.editorsclub.com Email: aamirhakeem@hotmail.com