

Honour Killing – Killing Humanity

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Abstract

Honour killing is the heinous act performed by self acclaimed and self appointed protectors of the society. Victims of honour killings are mostly women, who are considered to have brought shame, wrong traditions and practices to the family. Common terms that may be used for 'honour killing' are 'customary killing', 'domestic violence', 'family murders' and a form of 'terrorism'. Violence in the name of honour occurs all over the world and women are the soft targets internationally. Countries where honour killings occur are India, Pakistan, Middle – East countries, Latin America, United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Turkey, Canada and U.S.A. etc. India, where about one fifth of the total honour killings take place, tops the list. In India states like Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh witness maximum female foeticides and female infanticides.

Ways and means of honour killings vary and range from burning alive, poisoning, murdering with axe, starving until death shooting to forced suicide. The act of killing is usually performed by husband, father, brother, Khap Panchayats, Jirgas or hired men. Causes of honour killings are trivial like choosing a marriage or sex partner of one's choice, divorcing an abusive husband, getting raped, being politically active, indecently dressing up or jealousy.

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Association of the criminal behavior of killing under pretext of honour with anti-social personality disorder remains debatable. And, if they are psychopaths they should be attended by mental health care providers. Interesting fact about the perpetrators is that they commit crimes or murders without any remorse. They usually escape from punishment under the cover of religion. In a civilized society, there is no place for murdering others based on preconceived ideas. This issue should be addressed by way of making and enforcing laws, gathering public support and political will.

Keywords: Honour – Crime; Crime for Passion; Honour Based Violence; Khap – Panchayat.

Introduction

Human Rights Watch defines 'honour killings' as the acts of violence, usually murder, committed by male family members against female family members, who are held to have brought dishonor upon the family. A woman can be targeted by her family for a variety of reasons, including refusing to enter into an arranged marriage, being the victim of a sexual assault, seeking a divorce even from an abusive husband or allegedly committing adultery. The mere perception that a woman has behaved in a way that 'dishonours' her family is adequate enough to trigger an attack on her life.¹

An honour killing, also called customary killing, is the murder of a family or social group by other members, due to the belief of the perpetrators that the victim has brought dishonor upon the family or community. Honour killings are mostly directed

against women and girls.² Honour killings may be called as the family murders.³ So called 'honour' killings, just like rape, are a form of terrorism that functions to define gender lines, to explore and further define male dominance and to render all women chronically and profoundly unsafe.⁴

Scenario in India and Abroad

'Honour' – based violence occurs in communities where concepts of honour and shame are fundamentally bound up with the expected behaviours of families and individuals, particularly those of women. 5000 honour killings take place internationally per year. Out of which, 1000 occur in India and Pakistan each, whereas 12 per year are reported from United Kingdom.⁵ Gill argues that honour is used as distorted rationale for violence against women, including their murder in much of the world. It is evident in Latin America and Mediterranean society, Middle – East and parts of South Asia and in various communities originating within the Indian sub-continent.⁴

In 15th century, in Indian society, female infanticide was common. Dowry and Sati (voluntary/ involuntary burning of the widows on the funeral pyre of husband) was prevalent. The status of women was low. In Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh female foeticide and female infanticide are still big problems, evident from the disparity in male/ female birth rates. Laws against dowry have been made but are not enforced and women are still being burnt alive and daughters are still being killed in the wombs.⁶

Honour killings have been reported in northern regions of India, mainly in states of Delhi, Punjab, Rajasthan, U.P. and Bihar as a result of people marrying without their family's acceptance, and sometimes for marrying outside their caste or religion. In contrast, honour killings are rare to nonexistent in South India and Western states of Maharashtra and Gujarat. In West Bengal, honour killings ceased about a century ago, mainly due to activism and influence of reformists.⁷ In Pakistan hundreds of women die every year due to honour killing. Many cases are not reported, let alone punished. In most cases police take the man's side.⁸

By analyzing the lists of women murdered in U.K. over last 10 years in the name of 'honour', it becomes clear that some men and even some women feel entitled to kill those women, they see as having disempowered men by defying male authority.⁴ Every year in U.K. at least a dozen women are victims of honour killing, almost exclusively within Asian and

Middle Eastern families.⁹ In 2010 alone, Britain saw a 47% rise of honour related crimes. Data from U.K. police reported 2283 cases in 2010.¹⁰ Most of the attacks were conducted in cities that had high immigrant populations.¹¹

There are cases reported from Germany, Sweden, Belgium, Italy, Middle East, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Jordan, Canada, U.S.A., Egypt, Syria, Haiti, Brazil and Peru. In Latin American countries, in Peru, 70% of the murders of women in one year were committed by husband, boyfriend or lover.¹²

Causes

Two main factors contribute to violence against women: women's commodification and conceptions of honour.⁸ Some other identified causes of honour killings are; choosing a marriage partner of one's own choice, having a boyfriend, economic disparity, homosexuality, divorcing even the abusive husband, getting raped, refusal of an arranged marriage, allegations and rumors about a family member having 'illicit' relationships, patriarchal views on women, lower position of women in society, a culture of family honor and shame, sex outside marriage, leniency towards such killings in law, 'indecent' dressing in public places, woman chatting to a man on Facebook, children born out of wedlock, woman being politically active, women who do not follow strict dress code as per religion, sex inequalities, perceived 'purity' of a lineage (Rajput culture in India), jealousy or suspicion of infidelity, untouchability, prejudice against scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and poverty.¹ Sometimes honour killings are carried out on the flimsiest of grounds, such as by a man who said he had dreamt that his wife had betrayed him.⁸

Psychology of Honour Killing

Mental disorders such as anti-social personality disorders are known to be associated with criminal behavior. Psychopathy is associated with right hemisphere of brain involvement. But are perpetrators of honour killings, real psychopaths, who by definition have a salient feature of lack of remorse or guilt? Are they insane? If yes, how are they left unattended in the community? Are they mentally ill? If yes, then why haven't they come across mental health services?¹³

Honour killings can also be viewed as Culture Bound Syndrome. People in certain cultures have feelings of losing honour, feeling as if the powers are gone out of their hands, extreme anger and rage

and thus impulse of killing the identified targets. Honour Killing is thought to be a reflection of the pleasure principle of 'id', which has remained immature and has not attained full evolution and trans-formation.¹³

According to Dr. Amin Muhammad, Doctor of Psychiatry at the Memorial University, Newfoundland, "the perpetrators of killings are those, who would commit a crime or murder and not feel any remorse, these are signs of personality disorder." According to him, mental health afflictions suffered by the perpetrators of heinous crimes are largely overlooked due to a lack of understanding in western culture. Mental health care offered to people in developing countries, where honour killings are most prevalent, are inadequate. The perpetrators distort the facts and abuse religion to get away with these types of killings.¹⁴

As honour killings have started to occur in western cultures, there is an increase in exploration of psychology behind them. Honour Killing is considered to be a form of 'status anxiety'; the fear of losing status in the eyes of family and society. The families are under pressure to conform to social norms. This along with a sense of insecurity related to ostracism by community and the need to belong to the society and having social identity are some of the factors behind honour killings. Male domination, patriarchal societies and low status of women have close correlation to the incidence of honour killings.¹⁵

There is found to be clear correlation between cultures which are sexually repressive and honour killing. The majority of honour killings are the result of and a punishment for completely human instinct: interaction and love with the opposite gender. Many patriarchal societies have high level of sexual repression and harbor negative attitudes towards the human body and human sexuality. It is considered crime to fall in love with the member of a different caste or with someone from the same clan (gotra) or someone beyond the arranged marriage circle. Honour Killing is the pathological behaviour linked to a sense of vulnerability, threat from the other and a need for belonging and status that overrides rationale behavior and sanctions a gross aberration.¹⁵

Forms and Methods of Honour Killings

In the name of honour killing, women are shot down, burnt alive, poisoned, murdered with axes, starved until death, hanged and drowned. The methods of honour killings vary. In Sindh, Pakistan, a kari (Literally a 'black woman') and a karo (a 'black man') are hacked to pieces by axe and hatchets, often

with the complicity of the community. In Punjab, India, they usually kill by shooting and based on individual decision in private. In most cases, husbands, fathers or brothers of women commit the killings. In some cases Jirgas (tribal councils) decide that the woman should be killed, and send men to carry out this work.⁸

The victims range from pre pubescent girls to grandmothers. They are killed purely on the basis of allegations and not even given chance to give their version of the allegation.⁸ A forced suicide may be a substitute for an honour killing. In this case, the family members do not directly kill the victim themselves, but force her to commit suicide, in order to avoid punishment.^{16,17}

In Haryana, India, Khap Panchayats (Local caste-based councils) are involved in the evil act of honour killing. Khaps are clans and they correspond to gotra (lineage-segment) within caste groups. The power, that the khap panchayats have, is without any legal basis. Khap or caste panchayats wield much more power than the statutory panchayats in states like Haryana and order harsh punitive measures against couples who marry within the gotra. Even powerful politicians do not dare invoke the law against them.¹⁸

Strategies to Address Honour Killings

Strategies to address violence against women in the name of 'honour' must include:

- i) Gathering genuine public support.
- ii) Accepting the testimony of the victim, who reports that she has been threatened to be killed by her family or members of the society.
- iii) Effective legislation, both national and international to punish all forms of crime committed in the name of 'honour'.

The United Nations General Assembly in 1993 adopted the 'Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women', which urges states not to "invoke customs, traditions or religious consideration to avoid their obligation" to eliminate discriminatory treatment of women.⁸

Indian Parliament is required to enact a new legislation at the earliest for curbing the malpractices of, and the very existence of unconstitutional khap Panchayats. Anyone convicted under such law, irrespective of the quantum of punishment, should be debarred from contesting any election (even at any local level) for five years. Participation in khap congregations should attract a prison term. The administration should come up with various help

line numbers and special cells where people at risk for honour killings can approach for protection. Fast track courts should be constituted for handling cases of honour killings.¹⁹

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