

Honor Killings

CAN MURDERS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS BE STOPPED?

Each week brings horrific new headlines stating that, somewhere around the world, a woman or girl has been killed by a male relative for allegedly bringing dishonor upon her family. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, “In the name of preserving family ‘honor,’ women and girls are shot, stoned, burned, buried alive, strangled, smothered and knifed to death with horrifying regularity.” Between 5,000 and 20,000 so-called honor killings are committed each year, based on long-held beliefs that any female who commits — or is suspected of committing — an “immoral” act should be killed to “restore honor” to her family. Honor killings are deeply rooted in ancient patriarchal and fundamentalist traditions, which some judicial systems legitimize by pardoning offenders or handing out light sentences. Human-rights organizations are demanding that governments and the international community act more forcefully to stop honor killings, but officials in some countries are doing little to protect women and girls within their borders.

With posters of murdered women as a backdrop, elderly Kurdish women participate in a rally in Istanbul, Turkey, to protest so-called honor killings of young women and girls. Although condemned by the government, honor killings mostly occur in Turkey's Kurdish region, where they are part of traditional culture.



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Honor Killings

BY ROBERT KIENER

THE ISSUES

In the remote Pakistani province of Baluchistan, three teenage girls — Hameeda, Raheema and Fauzia — fell in love with the wrong people. They apparently wanted to marry husbands of their own choosing rather than the men selected by their local Umrani tribal leaders. Marrying without permission is considered an affront to the honor of the tribe.

Enraged, tribesmen kidnapped the girls, along with two older female relatives of the girls, and drove them all into the desert. The men then dragged the teenagers out of the car, beat them and shot them. But the girls did not die instantly, so their attackers allegedly threw them into a ditch and buried them alive, covering them with sand and rocks. When the older women, aged 45 and 38, objected, they too were shot and buried alive.¹

Two months later, after a human-rights organization revealed the murders, police opened an investigation. Several men were arrested, including the father, brothers and a cousin of the slain girls. But a local politician defended the murders as “honor killings,” justified by tradition — even though such murders have been illegal in Pakistan since 2004. Nevertheless, Israrullah Zehr, a member of parliament from Baluchistan, claimed the killings were part of a “centuries-old tradition” and vowed he would “continue to defend them.”²

The five victims were just some of the thousands of women and girls around the world who are murdered each year in so-called honor killings: socially sanc-



Fourteen-year-old Noor Jehan lies in a Karachi hospital after being shot five times and left in a ditch to die — allegedly by two male cousins. Jehan told reporters that when one of her cousins asked her to marry him and her father refused to consent, the spurned cousin claimed she had had sex with another man and tried to kill her to reclaim his “honor.” Jehan died a month later from an abdominal infection, becoming one of the 5,000-20,000 victims murdered each year in so-called honor killings.

AP Photo/Shakil Adil

tioned, premeditated murders — usually by male relatives — due to real or rumored premarital sex or infidelity or for having been raped or sexually abused. Women and girls are also killed for behaving in “immoral” ways — such as talking to boys, refusing to accept an arranged marriage or marrying outside of their ethnic group. The killer believes that his action cleanses the honor of his family and community.

“Such killings occur when the ‘honor’ of male members of a household is perceived to have been injured,” said I. A. Rehman, secretary general of the Lahore-based Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.³

Every week brings new reports of unbelievably cruel honor killings:

- Hena Begum, a 14-year-old Bangladeshi girl, died in February after being publicly flogged. Her crime? She had reportedly been raped by a 40-year-old married cousin.⁴ After the rape, family members reportedly beat her and accused her of having an affair with the cousin. The village council then sentenced her to 100 lashes.⁵

- Karima Metawe, 20, was rumored to have left her home in Alexandria, Egypt, without permission last September. Her two brothers and an uncle strangled her to death in front of her baby “to ‘restore’ their family’s honor.”⁶

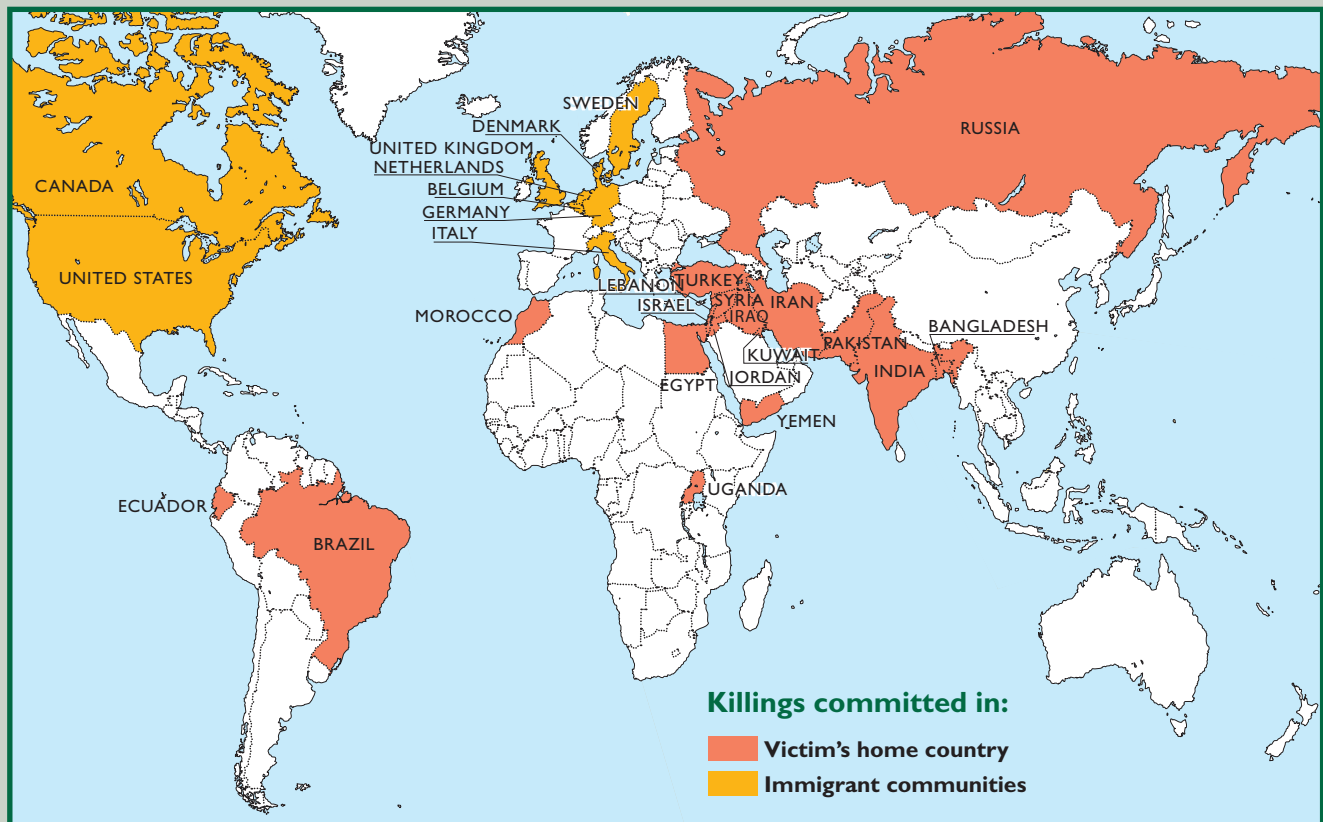
- As a punishment for “talking to boys,” 16-year-old Medine Memi was secretly murdered by her relatives last year in southeastern Turkey. Her body was found in a 6-foot-deep hole under a chicken pen; her hands were tied and her lungs and stomach were filled with soil, indicating she had been buried alive.⁷

Because so many honor killings are never reported — and because international organizations are discouraged from keeping statistics on such politically sensitive practices — no one knows how many honor killings occur each year. The United Nations Population Fund’s commonly quoted estimate — up to 5,000 women per year — is thought to be a gross undercount.⁸ The figure is closer to 20,000 a year worldwide, according to Diana Nammi, director of the London-based Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organization (IKWRO). Robert Fisk, a Beirut-based journalist, agrees. He wrote a multipart series on honor killings

Honor Killings Reported in 26 Countries

Experts say between 5,000 and 20,000 women and girls are killed each year in the name of family honor. Many of the victims are tortured, burned, stoned or strangled. The murders, which often go unpunished, have occurred in at least 26 countries — nine of them Western countries with large immigrant communities, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Germany.

Countries Where Honor Killings Occur



Sources: United Nations; news reports

after traveling throughout South Asia and the Middle East studying the practice, which he calls “one of the last great taboos.”⁹

During 2010 there were reportedly 960 honor killings in Pakistan alone, according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.¹⁰ In Syria activists claim up to 200 women die in honor killings annually.¹¹ In Iraq, more than 12,000 women died in honor killings between 1991 and 2007, according to Aso Kamal, a human-rights activist with the Doaa Network Against Violence.¹²

And honor killings apparently are on the rise, according to many observers. In February Turkey's justice minister shocked the country when he announced that murders of Turkish women had jumped from 66 in 2002 to 953 in just the first seven months of 2009 — a 1,400 percent increase. Some of Turkey's media have labeled the slaughter “Turkey's Shame.”¹³ Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan condemned the killings and said there was “no such thing as committing violence in the name of honor.” But the killings show no signs of slowing down.¹⁴

India has also seen a recent resurgence in honor killing, often related to men and women who violate Hindu marriage traditions, such as marrying a partner from a higher or lower caste. As Oxfam International has noted, “every six hours, somewhere in India, a young married woman is burned alive, beaten to death, or driven to commit suicide.”¹⁵

Many experts object to calling the murders “honor” killings. “There is nothing honorable about these killings,” says Aisha Gill, a senior lecturer and expert on honor killings at London's Roehampton University. “They are murders,

plain and simple. I see the term 'honor killings' as an oxymoron." Some prefer to call the murders "so-called honor killings," "femicide" or "shame killings."

According to Rana Husseini, a Jordanian journalist and author of the riveting 2009 book *Murder in the Name of Honor*, statistics are hard to pin down because "many honor killings are passed off as suicides, accidents and disappearances." For instance, a recent study in Pakistan found that one in five homicides is an honor killing — a total of 1,957 honor killings over four years. But author Muazzani Nasrullah, from Pakistan's highly regarded Aga Khan University in Karachi, noted, "The problem is much more than what is depicted in my paper."¹⁶

"Whatever the numbers," says Husseini, "it is clear that honor killings are one of the most serious global problems faced by women today."

Besides murder, other honor-related crimes are committed against women in so-called honor-based traditional societies, including stoning, whipping, acid throwing and forced suicides. According to Navi Pillay, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, "In the name of preserving family 'honor,' women and girls are shot, stoned, burned, buried alive, strangled, smothered and knifed to death with horrifying regularity."¹⁷

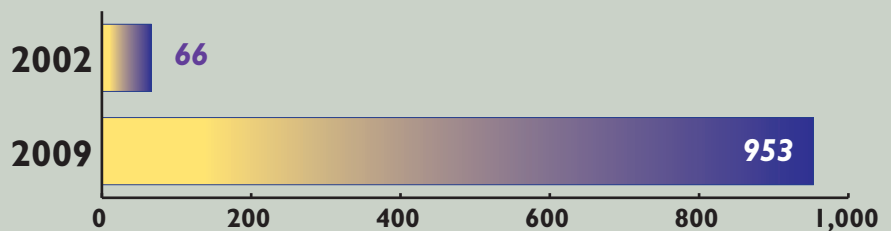
In cultures where honor killings occur, the killings are generally based on the belief that women are objects without rights: Honor may be embodied in the society's women but honor is the property of men, who are responsible for protecting it. As Amnesty International noted, "Women are considered the property of male relatives and seen to embody the honor of the men to whom they 'belong.' Women's bodies are considered the repositories of family honor." A woman suspected of damaging that honor may face punishment or death.

But their murderers often go scot-free. The laws in some countries le-

Female Murders Skyrocket in Turkey

Nearly 1,000 women were murdered in Turkey in 2009 — a 1,400 percent increase from 2002, when a religiously conservative Muslim government took power. Most of the murders were stabbings and shootings by family members. No one knows how many of the murders were so-called honor killings, which are illegal in Turkey, but women's-rights advocates say they were probably a large proportion. The government says it has enacted far-reaching gender-equality reforms, but women's groups point out that Turkey, with 74 million people, has only 54 shelters for women escaping violence at home, compared to Germany, which has 800 women's shelters for a population of 82 million.

Female Murders in Turkey, 2002 and 2009



Source: Dorian Jones, "Turkey's Murder Rate of Women Skyrockets," Voice of America, February 2011, www.voanews.com/english/news/europe/Turkeys-Murder-Rate-of-Women-Skyrockets-117093538.html

gitimize the murder of women by their husbands or relatives. In Syria, for example, the penal code grants immunity or a greatly reduced sentence to a man who kills a female relative. Jordan's penal code states, "He who discovers his wife or one of his female relatives committing adultery and kills, wounds or injures one of them, is exempted from any penalty."

Men are sometimes the victim of honor crimes, but such instances are much rarer than honor crimes committed against women. After a Pakistani college student married a woman without the permission of her higher-caste family, the bride's relatives fractured his legs with an ax and slashed his nose and ears. The victim, Mohammed Iqbal, said his attackers screamed, "You have mixed our honor with dirt" as they assaulted him. Last August, the Taliban stoned an Afghan couple to death for committing adultery.¹⁸

When there is prosecution, the punishments often are lax. A U.N. Commission on Human Rights report noted that the "great majority" of the honor crimes it examined in Pakistan went "unpunished either because no complaint was ever filed by relatives of the victims, or because the police refused to file a complaint." Even in cases where "murderers reportedly surrendered themselves to police with the murder weapon . . . no action was ever taken against them."¹⁹

Honor killing has been reported in more than a two dozen nations, but primarily occur in South Asia and the Middle East. In recent years honor killings have spread to immigrant communities in Western countries, including France, Germany, Sweden, the United States and the United Kingdom. (See map, p. 186.) In the U.K., for example, police investigate up to a dozen honor killings of women each year and estimate that at least 500 cases

Loss of Family Honor Can Have Dire Consequences

Intense societal pressure drives many honor killers.

What would lead a father or brother to murder a beloved daughter or sister, in the name of honor? The loss of honor in some traditional societies can have a devastating impact on a family, and perpetrators of honor crimes often say intense community pressure drove them to murder a loved one:

- “I had to protect my children,” said an anguished Palestinian mother of nine after putting a plastic bag over her daughter’s head and slitting her wrists because the teen had brought shame on the family by being raped and impregnated by a brother. “This is the only way I could protect my family’s honor.”¹
- “Honour is the only thing a man has,” said a sorrowful Pakistani man, who had strangled his 23-year-old daughter after she ran off with a man from a rival tribe. “I can still hear her screams; she was my favorite daughter. I want to destroy my hands and end my life.”²
- “I did it to wash with her blood the family honor . . . and in response to the will of society that would not have had any mercy on me if I didn’t,” said a 25-year-old Palestinian, explaining why he had hanged his sister. “Society taught us from childhood that blood is the only solution to wash the honor.”³

According to the London-based Centre for Social Cohesion — a nonpartisan organization that studies radicalization and extremism in Britain and studied honor killings in immigrant com-

munities in the U.K. — families with damaged honor can experience a variety of consequences, including:⁴

- **Ostracism** — The family can be ignored or ostracized by the rest of the community. Their children may be rejected at school by fellow members of their cultural, ethnic or religious group.
- **Economic damage** — The family may receive smaller dowries for their children. In some cases, shops and businesses can be boycotted or even physically attacked by community members who believe their collective honor has also been tarnished.
- **Political consequences** — Community leaders and politicians can lose votes, prestige and influence.
- **Loss of self-esteem** — Family members can become depressed or suicidal. Feelings of shame can hamper their interactions with neighbors and friends and negatively affect their work, possibly causing further damage to their social standing.

¹ Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, “Palestinian girl’s murder highlights growing number of ‘honor killings,’” Knight Ridder, Nov. 16, 2003.

² Robert Fisk, “Invisible Massacre: The Crimewave that Shames the World,” *The Independent*, Sept. 7, 2010, www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/fisk/invisible-massacre-the-crimewave-that-shames-the-world-2072201.html.

³ Yotam Feldner, “‘Honor’ Murders — Why the Perps Get off Easy,” *Middle East Quarterly*, December 2000, pp. 41-50.

⁴ “Crimes of the Community: Honour-Based Violence in the UK,” Centre for Social Cohesion, 2010, www.socialcohesion.co.uk/files/1229624550_1.pdf.

of other honor crimes, such as beatings or sexual assaults, are committed against women each year in Britain.²⁰

Although honor killings are most common in Muslim countries, they also are widespread in non-Muslim cultures. “It is a mistake to see this as a Muslim-only crime,” says Hussein. “There are also Christians, Hindus and Sikhs that carry out and condone honor crimes against women.” In Turkey’s Assyrian Christian community, a newlywed couple was killed by the bride’s Christian brother, reportedly “to restore the family honor.” The groom was Muslim.²¹

“Violence in the name of honor transcends communities and religions,” says Gill.

None of the world’s major religions condones honor-related crimes. The practice has traditional and cultural

origins, according to experts. Although Muslim scholars say there is no basis in the Quran for honor killing, that doesn’t stop some Muslim killers from trying to justify their actions on religious grounds. (See sidebar, p. 190.)

“These murders are called ‘honor killings’ because they are seen by their perpetrators as ways of re-establishing the family’s honor, which has been lost by extramarital activity, willing or unwilling, on the part of one of its female members,” wrote Kwame Anthony Appiah, a philosophy professor at Princeton University.²²

In one especially ghastly example, a father in Egypt paraded his daughter’s decapitated head through the streets shouting, “I avenged my honor.”²³ A Palestinian merchant explained to a reporter, “A woman shamed is like rotting

flesh. If it is not cut away, it will consume the body. . . . The whole family will be tainted if she is not killed.”²⁴

As the numbers of honor killings demonstrate, the pressure on family members to carry out these heinous crimes is immense. “Tradition is a powerful impetus for these perpetrators,” explains Hussein. “It supersedes familial love and makes many of these killers feel they have no choice but to attempt to restore their fallen honor.”

A few victims are beginning to fight back. Mukhtar Mai, a Pakistani woman, was gang-raped on orders of a village council to restore the honor of a local clan that said Mai’s family had violated the clan’s honor. But she refused to commit suicide, which was expected of her. Instead, she helped to prosecute her attackers and has become a spokeswoman

for the thousands of women who have silently suffered at the hands of so-called honor killers. (See sidebar, p. 196.)

“More and more girls and women are being killed every day, and there is so little awareness, punishment or justice,” she explains to a visitor in the women’s shelter and girls’ school she has built in rural Punjab. “The world has to hear their cries. We owe them that much at the very least.”

As women around the world continue to suffer at the hands of attackers bent on restoring family “honor,” here are some of the questions being asked:

Are honor killings a form of domestic violence?

The chilling murder of 16-year-old Canadian Muslim schoolgirl Aqsa Parvez made headlines around the world in 2007. For many it had all the hallmarks of an honor killing: She allegedly was strangled by her father for refusing to wear a hijab, a traditional Muslim headscarf. Earlier, she had left home and sought refuge in a shelter after telling her friends her father was going to kill her.²⁵

Many, however, viewed Aqsa’s murder as nothing more than an act of domestic violence. Women are killed in many societies, but the media are too quick to label every Muslim-on-Muslim murder an honor crime, says Mohamed Elmasary, president of the Canadian Islamic Congress. “I don’t want the public to think this is really an Islamic issue or an immigrant issue,” he said. “It is a teenager issue.”²⁶

Sheik Alaa El-Sayyed, imam at the Islamic Society of North America in Mississauga, Ontario, agreed. “The bottom line is, it’s a domestic violence issue,” he said.²⁷

Both men claimed that instantly labeling the killing an honor crime unfairly stigmatizes Muslims. “We, as Muslims, are Canadians, and we should be dealt with just like everyone else,” El-Sayyed said. “We have rights, duties . . . pros and cons . . . just like all other human beings.”²⁸



Reuters

Police present four male relatives of Saima Bibi, 17, who died Jan. 21 in the Punjab city of Bahawalpur, Pakistan. The men are charged with torturing and electrocuting Bibi to death in the name of family honor. She had eloped with a lower-caste neighbor, and a village council ruled that death was the appropriate punishment. Although honor killings are illegal in Pakistan, the U.N. says nearly 1,000 Pakistani women and girls were victims in 2010.

Others disagree. “Like many other Muslims, they are in denial,” explains Phyllis Chesler, a professor emerita of psychology and women’s studies at the Richmond College of City University of New York who conducted two studies on honor killings for the *Middle East Quarterly*. “Too many Muslims are claiming that honor killings are simply domestic violence. My investigations show that in case after case honor killings are quite distinct from domestic violence.”²⁹

Chesler insists: “Western domestic violence and honor killings are not the same. An honor killing is a conspiracy planned and carried out by the victim’s family of origin who view the killing as heroic. Daughter-stalking, daughter-beating and daughter-killing is not a Western cultural pattern, nor is it valorized. In the West, wife- and daughter-killers are considered criminals, not heroes; wife-killers are not assisted by their parents or in-laws.”

She and others list several characteristics of honor killings that distinguish them from domestic abuse:

Planning: Honor killings often follow death threats and may be carefully planned and premeditated. Domestic violence murders usually are spontaneous “crimes of passion.”

Reason: The motive given for honor killings is usually that the victim has “dishonored” the spouse or family. Honor is rarely, if ever, a reason given for domestic killings.

Perpetrator: The perpetrator of an honor killing usually does not act alone, as in domestic violence. “There is either an explicit or implicit approval or even encouragement by other members of the family to commit the murder,” noted University of California, Berkeley, researcher Rochelle L. Terman. “This is because honor must be restored for the collective, not just the individual.”³⁰

Perception: While domestic violence is rarely celebrated, many of those who commit or assist in honor killings show little or no remorse. Indeed, a Turkish study of 180 prisoners convicted of honor killings revealed that none

What Does Islam Say About Honor Killings?

Most scholars say Quran does not condone honor crimes.

Because so many honor killings occur in predominantly Muslim countries, many people assume Islam sanctions murders in the name of family or tribal honor. But, according to Islamic experts, the Quran does not support those claims.

"Nothing in the Quran allows honor killings," says Muzammil Siddiqi, chairman of the Islamic Law Council of North America. "They are totally un-Islamic and have nothing to do with the religion."

In fact, he says, the Quran states: "Never should a believer kill a believer. Take not life, which Allah hath made sacred, except by way of justice and law." And while the Quran does teach that a couple who commit adultery should both be flogged "with a hundred stripes," it does not demand death.

Furthermore, says Siddiqi, "Nowhere in the Quran is a family member or anyone but a government authority authorized to carry out any kind of punishment."

Sheikh Muhammad Al-Hanooti — a Muslim scholar and member of the Islamic judicial body, the North American Fiqh Council — explained that in Islam "even in the case of capital punishment, only the government can apply the law through the judicial procedures. No one has the authority to execute the law other than the officers who are in charge."¹

Such principles contradict what many Muslim honor killers claim: That a man whose family honor has been sullied by a woman must kill her in order to restore honor.

Max Gross, adjunct professor at Georgetown University's Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Studies, says, "Many critics of Islam point to the Quran or spurious versions of the *hadith*, the so-called teachings of Muhammad, claiming that Islam justifies honor killings. But scholars agree there is no justification in the Quran for these killings. On the contrary, Muhammad emphasized forgiveness over revenge."

In addition, honor crimes often are carried out based on rumors or suspicions that a female has behaved in an immoral way. However, the Quran forbids anyone from being punished for wrongdoing without conclusive proof: "And those who launch a charge against chaste women, and produce not four witnesses, . . . flog them with eighty stripes and reject their evidence ever after . . . for such men are wicked transgressors."

Nilofar Bakhtiar, a former adviser to Pakistan's prime minister, has said that using Islam to justify honor killings is "rubbish" and blamed such crimes in Pakistan on "the feudal tradition, the culture and the tribal system." She claimed that men "found it very convenient to say that what they don't want to do is 'against Islam' and what they want to do is 'in the name of Islam.'" ²

Sayyid Syeed, National Director for the Office for Interfaith and Community Alliances for the Islamic Society of North America, says, "Historically, tribal practices such as honor killings were carried out by practitioners who mistakenly believed them to be inspired by Islam."

While the view that women are the property of men, with no rights of their own, does not appear in the Quran, it is deeply rooted in Arab tradition, experts say. Such attitudes facilitate honor crimes, as has Shariah law, which treats women as less than the equals of men.

But as Kwame Anthony Appiah, a Princeton philosophy professor, has noted: "There is almost universal agreement among qualified interpreters of Islam that honor killing is un-Islamic."³

Other high-profile Muslims, including Syria's Grand Mufti cleric Ahmad Hassoun, have condemned honor killings.⁴ And Lebanon's senior Shiite cleric, the late Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, last year called the practice of murdering a female relative for alleged sexual misconduct a "vicious phenomenon." He issued a *fatwa*, or a religious ruling, forbidding honor killings. Such crimes, he said, are considered in Islam as "one of the Kabair [severe sins] whose perpetrator deserves to enter Hellfire in the afterlife."⁵

— Robert Kiener

¹ "Honor killing from an Islamic perspective," *OnIslam*, Feb. 22, 2011, www.onislam.net/english/ask-the-scholar/crimes-and-penalties/retaliation-qisas/174426-honor-killing-from-an-islamic-perspective.html.

² Jan Strupczewski, "Men distort religion to justify 'honour' killings," Reuters, Dec. 8, 2004, www.ncdsv.org/images/ExpertsMenDistortReligion.pdf.

³ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code* (2010), p. 153.

⁴ Rasha Elass, " 'Honor' killing spurs outcry in Syria," *The Christian Science Monitor*, Feb. 14, 2007, www.csmonitor.com/2007/0214/p07s02-wome.html.

⁵ "Fatwa against honor killings," VOA News, Feb. 18, 2010, www.voanews.com/a-41-2007-08-13-voa3-84654512.html.

regretted their actions. "In some cases, the victim's relatives even praised the perpetrator," said Mazhar Bagli, an associate professor of sociology at Turkey's Dicle University, who supervised the study.³¹

While some experts, such as Chesler, note that honor killings are "committed mainly by Muslims against Muslims," it is important to note that they

can occur across many religions and races. Terman has identified honor killings among Muslims, Christians, Jews, Yazidis, Druze, Sikhs, Hindus and nonbelievers.³²

"Because so-called honor killings are prevalent among Muslim societies, there is the misconception that they are condoned by Islam," says Hussein, the Jordanian journalist and au-

thor of *Murder in the Name of Honor*. Nowhere in the Quran or in any major interpretation of Sharia laws are honor killings prescribed, she says. "Furthermore, many reputable Islamic scholars and clerics have spoken out against the practice of honor killings," noted Terman.³³

However, some Muslim governments discourage discussion of the topic. The

IKWRO's Nammi explains, "Discussions about honor killings in Muslim communities have been taboo for a very long time." Indeed, some activists who are identifying honor killings are accused of stigmatizing Arab communities. They are also accused of perpetuating a Western view of their societies as "primitive" or "backward."

And Islamists who seek "to cover up this sin against Muslim girls and women attack those who would dare expose it as 'Islamophobes,'" says Chesler.

On the other hand, some women's-rights advocates argue that honor killings must be seen in historical perspective. "Until thirty years ago, it was common to hear about honor killings among Italians. But now when a man kills his wife, they call it a crime of passion," said Italian journalist Cinzia Tani. "It's the same concept taking different names: A man kills a woman of his family in order to assert his control over her body. The only difference is that back then the homicide of a woman was 100 percent acceptable." ³⁴

Canadian journalist Chris Selley said the world should abandon "this ridiculous, self-indulgent debate over the taxonomy of honour killings. Those on the left who abhor the term are right about one thing: A good few of the people who constantly shout it from the rooftops are mostly interested in demonizing Islam. But that doesn't change the fact that honour killings can — over shrieking objections from feminists — rather easily be distinguished from other cases of domestic violence. . . . Ultimately who cares what we call it?" ³⁵

John Esposito, an authority on Islam at Georgetown University and the author of the 2010 book *The Future of Islam*, and Sheila B. Lalwani, a research fellow at Georgetown University, noted, "Violence against women is a global phenomenon, not a religious one. Nevertheless it deserves the attention of every religious leader and responsible voter; anything less contributes to the

denial and complacency that permits it to persist." ³⁶

Are governments doing enough to deter honor killings?

Many women's advocates say governments are not doing enough to stop the slaughter of between 5,000 and 20,000 women a year in honor killings. "For example," says Nammi, the Iranian and Kurdish women's advocate "many states condone honor killing. It's a disgrace that these laws still exist."

Indeed, many countries have laws legalizing the murder of women by their relatives. For example, Article 220 of the Iranian Criminal Code states: "If a father — or his male ancestors — kill their children, they will not be prosecuted for murder." Last year on International Women's Day, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights' Pillay said, "The problem [of honor killings] is exacerbated by the fact that in a number of countries, domestic legal systems . . . still fully or partially exempt individuals guilty of honor killings from punishment." ³⁷

For example, in Kuwait, "He who surprises his wife in the act of adultery . . . or surprises his daughter, mother or sister in the act of sexual intercourse with a man and immediately kills her . . . shall be punished by prison for a period not more than three years," according to Article 153 of the Penal Code." ³⁸

The penal code in Jordan says, "[H]e who discovers his wife or one of his female relatives committing adultery and kills, wounds or injures one of them is exempted from any penalty." Article 98 provides for a reduced sentence if the crime was committed in extreme "rage." ³⁹

In Syria, Article 548, which limited sentences for honor killings to one year, was replaced recently with a law that mandated a minimum sentence of two years. ⁴⁰

In Haiti, a husband who immediately murders his wife after discovering her

in *flagrante delicto* (committing adultery) in the conjugal abode is to be pardoned. A wife's murder of her husband in similar circumstances is not excused. ⁴¹

Similar laws exist — and have existed — throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia. Until 1980 in Colombia, a husband could legally kill his wife for committing adultery. In Brazil until 1991 wife killings were considered non-criminal "honor killings." ⁴²

Although there has been pressure to reform such laws, there has been little action. In Jordan activists complained that lax laws encourage honor crimes. "The current law is nothing less than an endorsement for murdering women and girls," said Nadya Khalife, a women's-rights researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The women of Jordan need protection from these vicious acts enshrined in law, not preferential treatment for their killers." ⁴³

In response, Jordan's Justice Ministry announced it would set up a "special tribunal" to hear these cases. That's not enough, say activists. "Jordan needs to send a strong message to perpetrators that they can no longer get away with murder. It should start by amending the penal code to reflect the seriousness of these crimes and treat them the same as other killings," said Khalife. ⁴⁴ Efforts to reform Jordan's honor killing laws have repeatedly failed.

Why have these archaic, discriminatory laws been so hard to change? In many cases legislators are reluctant to offend fundamentalist and conservative factions. As the global advocacy movement Violence Is Not Our Culture explains, "As a result of the increased politicization of culture and religion in recent years, governments are increasingly afraid to combat hard-line and conservative elements in their societies." ⁴⁵

A Jordanian parliament member who opposed reforming honor crime laws spoke for many when he said, "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.”⁴⁶

Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov echoed that view. In 2009 after learning that seven young women had been shot in the head by male relatives and their bodies dumped by the roadside, he said they deserved to die. Claiming the women had “loose morals,” Kadyrov said, “If a woman runs around and if a man runs around with her, both of them are killed.” He also suggested that a man should be able to murder his daughter if she dishonors the family. “If he doesn’t kill her, what kind of man is he? He brings shame on himself!” Kadyrov said, according to Britain’s *Independent* newspaper.⁴⁷

Many worry that Kadyrov’s approval of honor killings will encourage more murders. “What the president says is law,” said Gistam Sakayeva, a Chechen women’s-rights activist. “Because the president said this, many will try to gain his favor by killing someone, even if there is no reason.”⁴⁸

There have been some small victories, however. In 1993, Tunisia strengthened its laws governing honor crimes. There have been no documented cases of honor crimes in Tunisia for the last 20 years.⁴⁹ Turkey has also reformed legislation and is regularly giving life-in-prison sentences to honor killers.

In addition to lax legislation, weak or nonexistent prosecution also permits honor killings to persist. As *The St. Petersburg [Fla.] Times* noted, “Police rarely investigate honor 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 honor killings.”⁵⁰

Says IKWRO’s Nammi, “Even if laws are changed, many countries are re-

luctant to investigate and prosecute honor killers. Time after time these killings are ignored.” In Pakistan, for example, honor killings are recognized as a punishable crime, but the laws are only occasionally enforced. According to a recent study, only 10 percent of Pakistan’s law enforcement personnel realize that the nation’s laws prohibit honor killings.⁵¹

In fact, one remote rural village court, or *jirga*, in Pakistan, worried that reporting such killings would defame the region, ruled in 2006 that anyone reporting an honor killing to the court or the police should be killed. After ruling that a recent honor killing was “permissible,” *jirga* member Malik Faiz Muhammad said, “We stick to our verdict that honour killing is permissible, and those who commit it will not be liable to any punishment. We will also not allow the aggrieved party to report the case to the police or file the case before a court. We will kill those who will violate the *jirga* verdict.”⁵²

On the other hand, the United Kingdom, in response to a growing number of honor killings among immigrant communities, created a special unit to investigate closed cases to see if they may have been honor killings.

The U.N.’s Pillay said, “The reality for most victims, including victims of honor killings, is that state institutions fail them and that most perpetrators of domestic violence can rely on a culture of impunity for the acts they commit.”⁵³

Is the international community doing enough to combat honor killings?

According to a 2000 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) report, “perhaps as many as 5,000 women and girls a year are murdered by members of their own families” in honor killings.⁵⁴ That is the number most widely used when describing honor killings.

But that estimate hasn’t been revised since it was first released in 2000. And it is so low as to be meaningless, according to many women’s-rights activists. “It really gets me angry that the United Nations has not seen fit to at least revise that figure,” says Nammi. “It is symptomatic of the U.N.’s inaction on honor killings.”

“It’s very hard to extract the statistic of honor killing from the broader statistic of the murder of women,” says Aminata Toure, chief of the UNFPA’s Gender, Human Rights and Culture Branch. “Also, states are not very keen on reporting these numbers. However, we are looking at revising our estimate.”

Other experts echo Nammi. Says Gill at London’s Roehampton University, “The U.N. has been helpful, but not as effective as it should be in terms of ending violence against women. It, and other international organizations, need to go beyond talking the talk and must demonstrate genuine political will to protect vulnerable women. We need to move beyond rhetoric. How many more killings do we need for something to be done?”

Chesler of the City University of New York is blunter: “The United Nations gets nothing done when it comes to honor killings. It hasn’t even offered women fleeing honor killers shelter or protection. It is ineffective.”

Not so, say U.N. proponents like Jordanian journalist and author Hussein. “The U.N. has been pressing the issue of honor killing,” she says, noting that Resolution 57/179, adopted by the General Assembly in 2002, called for nations to “investigate thoroughly, prosecute effectively and document cases of crimes against women committed in the name of honor and punish the perpetrators.”⁵⁵

Before that, in 1994, the U.N. Commission on Human Rights appointed a special rapporteur on violence against women, who has gathered testimony on honor killings in several reports since then. Also, both UNICEF and the U.N.

Development Fund for Women have programs to address honor killings.

"The United Nations is accomplishing a lot by raising the issue of honor killings [and] helping shed more light on what used to be a taboo subject," says Hussein.

"The United Nations cannot enact a law within a country," points out Toure. "We are doing much to advocate, educate and urge states to have tougher laws regarding honor killings and punish perpetrators. We also support women's organizations to help them speak up."

The United Nations has also made honor crimes a recognized form of violence against women in international-rights law. In 1979 the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), now commonly viewed as "an international bill of rights for women." (The treaty came into force in 1981, and has been ratified by every developed nation except the United States.)⁵⁶

Honor killings violate rights that CEDAW guarantees to all women, including the right to freely choose a spouse and equality in marriage. Further, the treaty specifically obligates states to defend women from honor crimes and requires states to disqualify "honor" as a legal defense in acts committed against women.⁵⁷

Critics of the convention claim that it is vulnerable to politicization. At a recent U.N. meeting to review Israel's compliance with CEDAW, some Israeli activists attacked Palestinian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for failing to raise the issue of honor killings in the Palestinian territories. Paula Kwe-skin, a legal researcher at the NGO Monitor, a Jerusalem-based research group, claimed that by not reporting on local honor killings, "These groups have abandoned the women they purport to advocate for and, as such, have once again called into question the sincerity of their pursuit of universal human rights."⁵⁸



Reuters/Anatolia News Agency/Tevfik Parlak

Sixteen-year-old Medine Meme was buried alive last year in this hole in her backyard in Kahta, a town in the Kurdish region of Turkey. Meme had been missing for 40 days and the hole had been cemented over when police were tipped off that she had been killed by her family. Her father and grandfather were later arrested for the murder. Meme had repeatedly told police that her grandfather was beating her for dishonoring the family by "talking to boys," but each time the police sent her home. Nearly 1,000 women were murdered in Turkey in 2009 — a 1,400 percent jump over 2002.

Women's-rights advocates say most of the deaths were probably honor killings.

Nammi, the Iranian and Kurdish women's advocate, said a CEDAW representative had "glossed over" the topic of honor killings in her presentation at a recent international conference on violence against women. When Nammi asked her why, "She told me it was such a sensitive topic that it was better not to talk too much about it. I think it was a case of political correctness gone too far."

Both critics and supporters of the United Nations and other international bodies acknowledge that no international court has sole jurisdiction over honor killings, making it the responsibility of each sovereign state to enforce

international human-rights law.

When they have leverage, though, some international bodies do pressure countries to reform their laws on honor killings. For instance, Turkey for years has been seeking membership in the European Union. As one of the prerequisites, the European Council in 2004 pressured Turkey to increase sentences for honor killers.

"Enforcement is the weak link in this issue," says Gill. "We have to put more pressure on the international community to hold states to account in relation to international laws and legal instruments such as CEDAW. Otherwise the laws are meaningless." ■

BACKGROUND

Early Origins

The tradition that gives rise to honor killing, namely that a woman's chastity is her family's property, can be traced to pre-Christian and pre-Islamic periods. The 3000 B.C. Assyrian legal

was against her. "If the finger is pointed at the wife of a citizen on account of another man, but she has not been caught lying with another man, for her husband's sake — she shall throw herself into the river," the code said. If the woman drowned she was guilty, if she survived she was innocent.

Women had few rights in ancient Rome. According to the Roman law of *Paterfamilias*, a father had the right to execute his unmarried daughter for

Roman law held that married women were the property of their husbands and could be sold into slavery, imprisoned or even killed at their husband's whim. The Roman statesman Cato advised a husband who discovered his wife committing adultery to kill her without resorting to the legal system: "If you catch your wife in adultery, you can kill her with impunity; she, however, cannot dare to lay a finger on you if you commit adultery, for it is the law."⁶⁰

Shakespeare's "Titus Andronicus," set in Rome's late empire, portrays the Roman general Titus killing his daughter Lavinia to restore their honor after she was raped and mutilated. As he kills her he cries, "Die, die Lavinia, and thy shame with thee, and with thy shame thy father's sorrow die!"

In India, according to the ancient Laws of Manu, women were considered immoral. Widows were encouraged to throw themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands (a custom known as *suttee*) to preserve their dead spouse's honor and prevent themselves from living a "life of dishonor." Hindu-Aryan husbands "were entitled to cut off the nose and ears of wives suspected or found guilty of infidelity — a custom that eerily echoes various cases of 'honor' crimes in the Indian subcontinent across the centuries."⁶¹

Ancient Aztec laws prescribed a death penalty for women accused of adultery. The sentence was usually carried out by strangulation or stoning. In ancient Peru husbands were pardoned if they killed their wives after finding them committing adultery. Their wives, however, enjoyed no such leniency: They were hung by their feet until dead if they murdered their husbands.⁶²

Even children fell victim to what many see as honor killings. In pre-Islamic Arabia fathers sometimes killed their infant daughters to prevent them from possibly bringing dishonor upon the family if they would one day be accused of

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AP Photo/Metropolitan Police

Banaz Mahmood, 20, an Iraqi Kurd from south London, was raped, strangled with a boot lace, stuffed into a suitcase and buried in Birmingham, England, in 2006. Her father and uncle later were convicted of ordering Mahmood's murder because they thought she had dishonored the family by leaving an unhappy arranged marriage and falling in love with another man. Two men hired by Mahmood's relatives were later convicted of the murder.

code in Mesopotamia, for example, held that the father of a defiled virgin could punish her in any way he wished.

The 1752 B.C. Code of Hammurabi, the ancient Babylonian set of laws, justifies honor killing related to sexual crimes. It held that a woman accused of adultery should throw herself into the river, no matter how much, or how little, evidence there

any indiscretion — real or perceived. As one writer noted, "A father held the power of life and death over his daughter, and upon marriage that power was transferred to the daughter's husband. Female adultery was a felony under Roman law, and the state actively prosecuted family members and others for not taking action against adulterous female relatives."⁵⁹

Chronology

1940s-1980s

Initial efforts are launched to strengthen women's rights.

1946

United Nations establishes Commission on the Status of Women to promote women's rights around the world.

1979

U.N. General Assembly adopts Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

1987

India passes Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, outlawing the once-common Hindu practice of *suttee* — the ritual burning of widows.

1990s

International women's movement focuses on violence against women and girls, including honor killings.

1990

To gain support from tribal leaders and religious fundamentalists, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein exempts men from punishment for committing honor killings.

1992

CEDAW committee adopts General Recommendation 19, which says governments may be responsible for citizens' "private acts" — such as so-called honor crimes — if the states "fail to act with due diligence to prevent violations of rights, or to investigate and punish acts of violence."

1993

U.N. World Conference on Human Rights adopts the Vienna Conven-

tion, which holds that "the human rights of women and the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of human rights."

1995

Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing calls on states to stop violence against women resulting from "harmful traditional or customary practices, cultural prejudices and extremism."

1998

U.N. Commission on Human Rights condemns honor killing.

1999

Jordan's Queen Noor holds public discussions on honor killings and pronounces them inconsistent with Islam and Jordanian constitutional law, even though parliamentary leaders claim such killings are justifiable.

2000s

Pressure intensifies on governments to outlaw and increase punishment for honor killings.

2000

U.N. estimates that up to 5,000 women and girls are victims of honor killings each year. . . . Jordanian lawmakers reject proposed law that would impose harsher penalties on honor killers.

2002

U.N. General Assembly Resolution 57/179 calls for "elimination of crimes against women committed in the name of honor." . . . Amnesty International reports that at least three women a day are victims of honor killings in Pakistan, and that the murderers are rarely arrested.

2004

U.K. reopens 117 cases involving Muslim women who may have been victims of honor killings. . . . After pressure from the European Council, Turkey increases punishments for honor killings. . . . U.N. adopts an updated version of Resolution 57/179, acknowledging that girls also can be victims of honor crimes.

2006

Village court in Pakistan rules that reporting an honor killing to the court or the police is punishable by death.

2009

European Parliament describes rise in honor crimes in Europe as an "emergency." . . . Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov justifies the murders of seven women by claiming they had "loose morals" and are the property of their husbands.

2010

Indian government investigates upsurge in honor killings. . . . Afghan government threatens to close down shelters for women trying to escape honor killings. U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees reports 960 honor killings a year in Pakistan. Other estimates indicate that the number of honor killings worldwide is probably close to 20,000.

2011

Women's-rights advocates in Turkey partly blame honor killings for a 1,400 percent rise in the femicide rate between 2002 and 2009. . . . Phoenix-based Iraqi Muslim is convicted of deliberately running over and killing his daughter with his car after she refused to take part in an arranged marriage.

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sexual misconduct outside of marriage. As a proverb said, “The dispatch of daughters is a kindness” and “the burial of daughters is a noble deed.”⁶³ This practice is condemned and explicitly prohibited in the Quran, according to Islamic scholars.

But many experts on honor killing believe the Bible contains clear references to honor killing. For example, Leviticus 21:9 declares, “And the daughter of any priest, if she profane herself by playing the whore, she profaneth her father. She shall be burnt by fire.” Others argue that a verse in Exodus (21:17) advocates honor killing: “And he that curseth his father, or his mother, shall surely be put to death.”

Medieval Prejudices

Women’s status remained low throughout the Middle Ages. In the 13th century the Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas claimed that women were created only to be “men’s help-mate” and promoted the idea that men should use “a necessary object, woman, who is needed to preserve the species and to provide food and drink.”⁶⁴

The witchcraft hysteria that spread across Europe between the 14th and 17th centuries exemplifies the extent of women’s oppression. As European societies suffered from the Black Plague, the 100 Years War and other troubled times, religious leaders blamed a raft of problems on witches. About 80 per-

cent of the 30,000 to 60,000 people executed for practicing witchcraft were female. As Catholic Inquisitors wrote in the 1480s, “All wickedness is but little to the wickedness of a woman. . . . Women are . . . a structural defect rooted in the original creation.”⁶⁵

While women continued to be subjugated elsewhere around the world, their lot began to improve somewhat in the West during the Age of Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries.

During the 19th century increasing numbers of women began taking jobs outside the home. As a result, governments began to pass laws that both protected them on the job and granted them more and more legal rights. The British Mines Act of 1842, for

Honor Crime Survivor Becomes Women’s Champion

After gang-rape, she refused to commit suicide.

It’s early morning in the tiny, rural Punjab village of Meerwala, and a handful of women waits patiently outside the Mukhtar Mai Women’s Crisis Relief Center. Like thousands of women before them, each of these women has come to this center to seek out the help of an inspiring hero who has become a symbol of strength and resistance to honor crimes.

Women arrive from all over the region with horribly scarred faces, victims of acid attacks by suitors who claim the women have dishonored them by refusing their marriage proposals. Still others have had their ears or noses cut off — a common form of punishment for supposed adulterers. The woman they have come all this way to see is Mukhtar Mai, a humble villager who has become famous for courageously standing up for her own rights and now fights for the rights of Pakistani women and women everywhere.

Her story made headlines around the world. In 2002 a village tribe, the Mastois, accused Mukhtar’s 12-year-old brother of “bringing dishonor” to them by walking unaccompanied with a 30-year old Mastoi woman. The brother later claimed that he had been raped by the Mastois and that they were covering up the rape by falsely claiming he had dishonored them.¹

The higher-caste tribal elders proclaimed that to restore the Mastois’ honor, Mukhtar Mai should be gang-raped. They told her father Ghulam that if he did not hand over Mukhtar, they would rape all of his daughters.

Accompanied by her father and her brother and clutching her Quran, Mukhtar approached the tribal elders, head bowed,

and knelt in front of them. She assumed they would “forgive” her, “because I had done nothing wrong,” she remembers.

Instead, four men grabbed her, dragged her into a nearby shed and gang-raped her as others held her father and uncle at gunpoint. When the father protested, the men only laughed. After the attack, the men threw Mukhtar, nearly naked, onto the ground outside. Ghulam wrapped a blanket around his daughter and carried her home.

Defiled and shamed in front of her entire village, Mukhtar felt she had only one option. Reporting the crime to the police would only bring more shame to her family. Honor demanded that she kill herself.

But after lying in bed for three days and contemplating suicide, Mukhtar took courage from her parents and the local mullah — who condemned the rape — and made a startling decision. She decided to live and report the attack to police.

“I will fight them,” she bravely told her parents. Her decision was unheard of in rural Punjab, a world where men are rarely punished for such so-called honor crimes against women.

Six of the Mastoi men were found guilty of rape and sentenced to life imprisonment. The case has been appealed several times and is still winding its way through Pakistan’s court system, but her attackers remain in jail.

Mukhtar’s initial courtroom victory made her an unlikely hero for women’s rights in Pakistan. But the meek, low-caste and illiterate woman somehow found the strength and courage to turn her personal tragedy into a triumph for others. She has

used her notoriety to build schools, operate a rape-crisis center and bring health care to her destitute part of the country.

In doing so she has struck a chord in the hearts of people around the world. Mukhtar Mai “proves that one woman can change the world,” said former American First Lady Laura Bush. Others have compared her to Martin Luther King, Gandhi and Rosa Parks.²

Mukhtar has received a slew of international awards, been feted by heads of state and Hollywood superstars and collaborated on a memoir, called *In the Name of Honor: A Memoir*.

More and more women are turning to her for help instead of surrendering themselves to their local *panchayat*, or tribal council. She has almost single-handedly rescued countless Pakistani women from the stranglehold of traditional justice. “Against all odds, this humble peasant woman has led a quiet revolution,” says noted Pakistani human-rights activist Aseel Gonor. “She is empowering and emancipating women.”

As Mukhtar herself often says, “A mighty river is born from a rainstorm. It just takes someone to be that first drop of rain.”

— **Robert Kiener**

¹ Khalid Tanveer, “Thousands of women rally in Pakistan to support rape victim,” *The Associated Press*, March 7, 2005.

² Nicholas D. Kristof, “The Rosa Parks for the 21st Century,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 8, 2005, p. A27.



Gang-raped on the orders of a Pakistani village council to restore a local clan's honor, Mukhtar Mai refused to commit suicide, as is often expected in such cases, and chose instead to help prosecute her attackers. She has since become a world-renowned opponent of honor killings.

example, prohibited women from working underground. John Stuart Mill, a supporter of women's rights and author of the essay “The Subjection of Women,” introduced language in the British House of Commons calling for women to be granted the right to vote, but it did not pass.

More governments began giving women long-denied rights. The Married Women's Property Act of 1870 and a series of other measures allowed British wives to own property. In 1893, New Zealand became the first nation to grant full suffrage to women, followed over the next two decades by Finland, Norway, Denmark and Iceland. The United States granted women suffrage in 1920.⁶⁶

Honor killings, however, continued. In India, for example, many women were killed during the bloody

partition of the country between 1947 and 1950. Indeed, as one writer noted, “The partition years can be seen to be the beginning of the tradition of honor killing [in India] on a large scale.”⁶⁷

Since 1945, when the U.N. was founded, the international human-rights community has alerted the world to the continuing practice of honor-related crimes and begun to encourage interest in change. Honor crimes have been recognized as a form of violence against women in international human-rights law because they violate women's security, right to life and, freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

The U.N.'s Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women defined discrimination against women as “any

distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.”

Countries that ratified the treaty were legally bound to abolish discriminatory laws against women, take steps to end trafficking of girls and women and ensure women equal access to political and public life.

But CEDAW did not specifically mention violence, so in 1992 General Recommendation 19 defined gender-based violence as a form of discrimination against women and explicitly mentioned “honor crimes.”



Reuters (both)

Gruesome Aftermath

Honor crimes occur in South Asia's Christian, Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities. In India, couples involved in socially taboo relationships or marriages outside of their religion or caste are often murdered for sully the honor of the family or village. That's why villagers in the northern Indian state of Haryana in 2008 allegedly murdered Sunita Devi (top, left), 21, and her partner, Jasbir Singh, 22, who was from another caste. In Pakistan, another type of honor crime involves disfiguring a woman who "shames" a man. Ayesha Baloch, 18, (bottom, right) was dragged to a field in 2006 and held down by her brother-in-law while her husband slit her upper lip and nostril with a knife. The husband claimed she was not a virgin when he married her.

In 1993 the U.N. Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women strengthened CEDAW by specifically defining "violence against women" as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."

The declaration was introduced to pressure states into acknowledging that honor crimes were public, not private, matters. CEDAW also required states to disqualify honor as a legal defense for violence against women. Article Four notes: "States should condemn violence against women and should not invoke any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination."

Honor killing also was discussed in 1995 at the U.N.-sponsored Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. A resolution called for states to "take urgent action to combat and eliminate violence against women, which is a human-rights violation resulting from harmful traditional or customary practices, cultural prejudices and extremism."

In 2002 the General Assembly adopted Resolution 57/179, which urged states to investigate, document and prosecute honor crimes in order to work "towards the elimination of crimes against women committed in the name of honor." It noted that "states need to intensify efforts to raise awareness of the need to prevent and eliminate crimes against women committed in the name of honor, with the aim of changing the attitudes and behavior that allow such crimes to be committed." ⁶⁸ An updated version of this resolution adopted in 2004 acknowledged that girls also can be victims of honor crimes.

Killings Spread

Although the United Nations, other international organizations and the media have raised awareness of honor killing, the atrocities continue and are spreading to immigrant communities in Europe and the United States.

In the United Kingdom police estimate that at least 12 women are murdered annually in honor killings. British police are training officers to recognize the tell-tale signs of such crimes. "Honour-based violence is complicated and a sensitive crime to investigate," said Det. Chief Inspector Gerry Campbell of the Metropolitan Police. "It's fathers, brothers, uncles, mums and cousins, and the victim — potential victim — has a fear of criminalising or demonising their family so they can be reluctant to come forward."⁶⁹

With honor killings increasing throughout Europe (mostly within Muslim immigrant communities), the region is only beginning to come to grips with the phenomenon. In 2009 the European Parliamentary Assembly described the outbreak of honor crimes in Europe as an "emergency." Its Resolution 1681 noted, "the problem, far from diminishing, has worsened, including in Europe. It mainly affects women, who are its most frequent victims, both in Europe and the rest of the world, especially in patriarchal and fundamentalist communities and societies." It advised nations to create national action plans to combat violence against women, including violence committed in the name of "honor."⁷⁰

The United States is not immune. Over the last several years at least six men have been accused of committing honor killings in the United States.⁷¹ Faleh Almaleki, an Iranian immigrant, recently was convicted of second-degree murder for running over his 20-year-old daughter, Noor, with his Jeep because she spurned an arranged marriage and insisted on living with her boyfriend. ■



AFP/Getty Images/Joseph Barrak

The late Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah of Lebanon last year called honor killing a "vicious phenomenon" and issued a fatwa, or a religious ruling, forbidding them. He said such crimes are considered in Islam as "one of the Kabair [severe sins] whose perpetrator deserves to enter Hellfire in the afterlife."

CURRENT SITUATION

Providing Shelter?

"One step forward, two steps back." "Adding insult to injury." "Shameful and dangerous."

That's how women's activists describe the recently proposed law in Afghanistan

that would turn the control of women's shelters over to the government. Under the law a woman hoping to enter a shelter would have to obtain the approval of eight different government offices, and the shelters would be run under the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

In a country that already lacks safe and secure facilities to protect women from honor-related crimes or domestic abuse, many see this law as a serious threat to women's lives and freedom. "Shelter administrators say they already get pressure from high-ranking government officials on behalf of

HONOR KILLINGS

families who want the women back in their communities — even when it's likely that the women or girls will be killed when they return," said Quil Lawrence, a reporter for National Public Radio. ⁷²

The proposed law has reignited the debate about the legality of women's

But in other countries, there are some positive developments regarding sheltering women from honor crimes.

In 2010 India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh ordered a commission to study which penalties for honor killing should be increased, and the nation's Supreme Court asked the na-

mandos," the charity has grown to 2,000 volunteers from all across India. ⁷⁶

Marriage-related honor killings occur throughout India. In many cases families would rather kill their children than suffer from the stigma of them marrying a partner considered unsuitable. Often village caste councils sanction the killings.

Nearly every day brings news of caste-related honor killings. For example:

- In Delhi last June a young couple was tied up and tortured to death because the man was from a lower caste than his girlfriend. ⁷⁷
- Two months later a newlywed was burned to death in Northern India for marrying against the wishes of his family. ⁷⁸
- In January a young couple was slaughtered and left in a field in Tamil Nadu because they were from different castes. ⁷⁹

The Love Commandos have rescued hundreds of couples from possible murder and helped them to marry. "In every nook and corner of the country there are couples under threat," said Love Commandos founder Sanjoy Sachdev. ⁸⁰

Women's shelters have also sprung up elsewhere, from Asia to Europe to the United Kingdom. But much more needs to be done, according to rights activists. Turkey, for instance, has only 54 shelters for a population of 74 million. ⁸¹ "Until we can wipe out this barbaric practice we need to protect and shelter those who are most vulnerable," says Pakistani activist Mai, who runs her own shelter in the rural Punjab and narrowly escaped being a victim of an honor killing.

Legal Efforts

Women's-rights groups say some progress has been made recently in attacking the problem of honor killings. "Both the media and women's-rights activists have helped shine a light on this problem, which has re-

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Reuters/Christian Charisius

Women's-rights activist Saltanat Shalkibayeva holds up a picture of 16-year-old honor-killing victim Morsal Obeidi outside a courthouse in Hamburg, Germany, on Dec. 16, 2008, as the murder trial for Obeidi's brother begins. The Afghan-born Ahmad Obeidi, 23, was accused of stabbing his sister more than 20 times because she didn't live a strict Muslim life. He was sentenced to life in prison. As the verdict was announced, the unrepentant defendant screamed that if the trial had occurred in Afghanistan, he would have been released long ago.

The sign behind Shalkibayeva reads, "Say no to power against woman — live free."

shelters under Muslim law. In October 2010 the Afghan Supreme Court proclaimed that any woman who ran away from home could be charged with adultery or prostitution unless she went to the police or a relative's home. Also, a 2010 television report alleged that women's shelters "are fronts for prostitution." ⁷³

Age-old prejudices die hard. "You've got a parliament, a cabinet [and] various ministries that are effectively controlled by conservative factions that think very much like the Taliban when it comes to things like women's rights," said Rachel Reid, Afghanistan researcher for Human Rights Watch. ⁷⁴

tional and local governments to report on efforts to stop the crimes. "The Indian government should press ahead to strengthen its laws and make community leaders liable for punishment if their edicts incite so-called honor killings," said Meenakshi Ganguly, South Asia director of Human Rights Watch. "Murder is murder, and customary sentiment should not prevail over basic rights and the laws of the land." ⁷⁵

After a surge in the number of honor killings in northern India last year, volunteers banded together to rescue and shelter young men and women threatened with murder for marrying outside of their caste. Named the "Love Com-

Are Muslims being unfairly stigmatized in honor crime coverage?



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ever since the Sept. 11 attacks in the United States, the Western media have become more biased in their coverage of Arabs and Muslims, including in regard to how they report on so-called honor killings.

A so-called honor crime occurs when the family of a woman decides that she has tarnished their reputation and the only way to eliminate this “headache and shame” is to kill her. I have conducted extensive research and readings and concluded that these kinds of murders are not restricted to any country, class or religion. They have been committed recently by members of the Muslim, Christian, Sikh and Yazidi faiths.

Violence against women — including killing for adultery and “illicit” sexual activities — has been the norm since ancient civilizations and later in the world’s three main religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All three religions proposed punishments for female [and male] adulterers and “sinners.” In the Dark Ages, women were considered witches and were mostly punished or executed for having sex outside the marriage.

The “punishment” of women for “immoral” sexual activities in the West began decreasing after the Industrial Revolution, the creation of the pill, multiple wars and other factors. But Western women still are being killed by their husbands, ex-spouses and boyfriends because of possessiveness, jealousy, suspicion and infidelity — so-called “crimes of passion.”

Meanwhile, in the Muslim world, women are murdered for those reasons and for reasons related to family honor. But the crime is motivated by culture and patriarchal beliefs that women are the property of their male guardians. Societies in the Muslim world are still developing and progressing. Women have become more educated and more independent. This has created some clashes with male family members who expect certain roles for females. That was once the case in the West, and it will change eventually in the Muslim world.

Meanwhile, the Western media’s coverage of women’s issues and domestic violence has been biased toward Muslims. For instance, if the murderer is a Muslim, then he/she is immediately labeled as Muslim. But we are never informed about the religion of a murderer if he/she is Christian, Jewish, atheist, etc.

This labeling will only increase the hatred and fear of Muslims and will further increase intolerance toward religions and traditions between the East and the West. The Western media should take a more objective and responsible approach when covering such issues.



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hindu honor killings in India have been covered in the mainstream American media, but Muslim honor killings in the West — such as in Arizona, Georgia, Illinois, Ohio, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Texas and Virginia — have barely been covered. When they are, experts are quoted insisting that the crime has nothing to do with Islam and that every group does it — even though most honor killings in the West are Muslim-on-Muslim crimes.

Some Muslims say it is unfair for the media to identify a wife- or daughter-murderer as a Muslim because the religion is not listed for all those arrested for domestic femicide. But Western domestic violence and honor killings are not the same. An honor killing is a conspiracy carried out by the victim’s family, which views the killing as heroic. Daughter-stalking and daughter-killing are not a Western cultural pattern, nor are they valorized. In the West, wife- and daughter-killers are considered criminals, not heroes; and wife-killers are not assisted by their parents or in-laws.

According to my 2009 and 2010 studies in *Middle East Quarterly*, 58 percent of honor killing victims worldwide were murdered for being “too Western.” Thus, an honor killing is part of a war waged by one culture against another. The religious and ideological fanaticism that drove Arab men to fly planes into the World Trade Center is the same fanaticism that drove an Iraqi-American Muslim father to run over his daughter with a two-ton jeep because she refused an arranged marriage and wore makeup and jeans.

True, nothing in “Islam” per se explicitly condones honor killings. However, Muslim leaders have not preached against this crime, and Muslim-majority countries have rarely prosecuted it.

Hindus, not Muslims, are being unfairly stigmatized by media coverage of honor killings. While Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims do perpetrate honor murders in India, Hindu and Sikh immigrants rarely practice the custom in the West. And the Hindu Indian government prosecutes it as a crime. India’s Muslim neighbor, Pakistan, resists doing so.

Some fear that singling out only Muslims will stigmatize them. This “politically correct view” is fashionable but also dangerous because if we fail to understand this crime we will never be able to prevent or to prosecute it.

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sulted in some governments being pushed, some shamed, into acting,” explains the UNFPA’s Toure.

Last November at a conference to celebrate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Kurdish Prime Minister Barham Salih condemned honor killings and promised his government would work to end what he called an “embarrassing” act and the result of “social backwardness and a patriarchal domination.”⁸² Activists hope he’ll keep his word. In 2008 the government amended a law that now regards honor killing as murder. In the

teenager begging for mercy before a man smashed her skull with a cinder block. Aswad’s male relatives — members of the secretive Yazidi religious sect — are believed to have arranged her death because she had dated a Sunni boy. The Yazidi religion includes elements of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam — and forbids interfaith relationships.⁸³

Four men (including some of Aswad’s relatives) were convicted and sentenced to die for the murder but were released from prison a year later.⁸⁴ The case exacerbated sectarian tension, which was rampant at the time

first ever handed down in an honor killing case. Women’s-rights activists have hailed the decision, which is a significant break with tradition. “An ugly nexus between politicians, policemen and these self-appointed guardians of tradition — who tend to dominate elected local assemblies as well as unelected caste ones — keeps most honour killings out of court,” noted *The Economist*.⁸⁶

Turkey’s response to its grim new skyrocketing femicide statistics — admitting the problem and condemning it — is also seen as a step forward. “Too many governments have been reluctant to even speak out about honor killings,” says Gill, of London’s Roehampton University. “It’s a necessary step to stopping this violence.”

While Turkey recently strengthened its punishment for honor killings to include life imprisonment, regardless of the age of the murderer, nearby Syria has made what many see as a “token” change in punishing such killers: The two-year sentence was raised to between five and seven years.

Activists have been pressuring the Syrian government to increase the punishment for honor killers, so many saw it as a positive sign when a religious leader publicly condemned such killings and even pushed for longer sentences for those convicted of honor killings.

“He who kills on claims of honour is a killer, and should be punished,” said Grand Mufti of Syria Ahmen Badr al-Din Hassoun. “Islamic jurisprudence doesn’t allow people to live by their own laws.”⁸⁷



PR NewsFoto/Stop Islamization of America

The group Stop Islamization of America uses a photo of slain Texas teenagers Amina and Sarah Said in an anti-honor-killing advertising campaign in Chicago. The Lewisville, Texas, sisters were found shot dead in their father’s abandoned cab in a parking lot near Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport on Jan. 1, 2008. Police believe their Egyptian-born father, Yaser Abdel Said — who has been missing since the murder — killed the girls for refusing to accept his culture and religious beliefs. Muslim groups say the murders had nothing to do with Islam.

past killers had been either let off or given light sentences.

In fact, one of the most high-profile and horrific honor killings occurred in the Kurdish region of Iraq in April 2007, when an angry mob cheered as 17-year-old Duaa Khalil Aswad was stoned to death in the village of Bashiqa, with nearby security personnel watching. Cell-phone videos of the murder circulated on the Internet, showing the

in Iraq. Two weeks after the murder, more than 20 Yazidis in nearby Mosul were dragged from a bus and shot to death, allegedly by Sunni gunmen in retribution for Aswad’s murder.⁸⁵

Last year a court in the northern India state of Haryana sentenced five men to death and one to life in prison for killing a young couple who married against the wishes of village elders. The capital sentences were the

OUTLOOK

Needed: Three ‘Ps’

Jordanian journalist Husseini began writing about honor killings in 1993.

Her investigations, newspaper articles, speeches and book have made her an international expert on the grim subject. She has a perspective on what she insists on calling “so-called honor killings” that few others can rival. Yet, despite all the horrors that she has seen and reported on over the last two decades, she is an optimist.

“I think we are making a lot of progress,” she notes. “Twenty years ago no one wanted to talk about this subject. It was denied, hushed up; it was taboo. Today, however, the topic is being debated, and it’s featured in the press, on television and even in movies and plays. It’s even being talked about on Facebook.”

Like other women’s-rights proponents, Husseinini sees the growing willingness to address the problem of honor killings as the first step in prevention and better prosecution. “These crimes are not going to end overnight; we have to raise awareness, change laws, educate and empower women, convince religious and cultural leaders to condemn the murders, and more. But I see more and more people expressing willingness for better laws and more protection for women. I think there will be less and less of these murders as time goes on.”

A recent honor killing prosecution in the United Kingdom supports Husseinini’s opinion. In December 2009 Mehmet Goren was convicted of murdering his 15-year-old daughter Tulay because he believed she had shamed him.⁸⁸ But the conviction only happened after Goren’s wife came forward — 10 years after the murder — to testify against her husband.

“She only broke her silence because she was convinced she would be protected,” explains London-based women’s-rights activist Nammi. “A case like this gives others in the community the courage to come forward and help put an end to these killings. Because of this, and other reasons, I think we will see less honor killings as time goes on.”

As Husseinini notes, “There is still so much that needs to be done to tackle this crime. These murders are just starting to receive the attention they deserve.” Many believe that as more societies modernize, the less prone they will be to accept honor killings. Experts stress the need for “the three P’s”: prevention, protection and prosecution. On their wish lists are such requirements as:

- Improving the education and emancipation of women,
- Raising legislative, law enforcement and public awareness,
- Researching the causes and consequences of honor killings, and
- Sheltering women threatened with these crimes.

“The more seriously the world takes honor killings, the less they will occur,” says Gill, at Roehampton University.

“Violence against women is a pervasive problem across the globe. Honor killing is only one of its many modes, but reforming [the concept of] honor is relevant, I believe, to every form of gendered violence,” noted Princeton’s Appiah. “Every society needs to sustain codes in which assaulting a woman — assaulting anyone — in your own family is a source of dishonor, a cause of shame.”⁸⁹

Pakistan’s activist Mai speaks for many women’s-rights supporters when she adds, “How important is this? It’s a matter of life and death.” ■

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Amnesty International, 1 Easton Street, London, WC1X 0DW, U.K.; +44-20-74135500; www.amnesty.org. International activist movement that campaigns to end human-rights abuses, including honor crimes.

Arab Regional Resource Center on Violence Against Women, P.O. Box 23215, Amman 11115, Jordan; 962 6 5543864; 3www.amanjordan.org. Women's organization that monitors human-rights abuses in the Middle East.

Center for Social Cohesion, 210 Pentonville Rd., London, N1 9JY, England; (207) 3409641; www.socialcohesion.co.uk. Specializes in studying radicalization and extremism in Britain.

Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Aiwan-I-Jamjoor, 107-Tipu Block, New Garden Town, Lahore, Pakistan; 92 42 35838341; www.hrcp.cjb.net. Long-established nongovernmental organization that promotes human rights and democratic reforms in Pakistan.

Human Rights Watch, 350 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10118; (212) 290-4700; www.hrw.org. The largest U.S. human-rights organization; investigates abuses around the world, including honor crimes and honor killings.

Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organization, P.O. Box 65840, London, EC2P 2FS, U.K.; 0207 920 6460; www.ikwro.org.uk. International charity committed to women's equality, human rights and empowerment of women.

United Nations Development Fund for Women, 304 E. 45th St., 15th Floor, New York, NY 10017; (212) 906-6400; www.unifem.org. Promotes women's empowerment and gender equality.

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Palais Wilson, 52 rue des Paquis, CH-1201, Geneva, Switzerland; 41 22 917 9220; www.ohchr.org. Supports the work of the U.N. human-rights offices, such as the Human Rights Council.

United Nations Population Fund, 605 Third Ave., New York, NY 10158; (212) 297-5000; www.unfpa.org. International development agency that promotes "the right of every woman, man and child to enjoy a life of health and equal opportunity."

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The Next Step:

Additional Articles from Current Periodicals

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“A Matter of Dishonour,” *The Independent* (U.K.), Sept. 10, 2010.

Many believe that Muslims have taken excessive criticism for honor killings because they are an easy political target.

“Fundamentalists Accused of Hijacking Traditional Values,” *The Hindu* (India), March 4, 2011, www.hindu.com/2011/03/04/stories/2011030462610500.htm.

Religious fundamentalists find themselves struggling to deal with modernity and must address objections to traditional practices, such as honor killings and dowry deaths.

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Myers, Amanda Lee, “Iraqi Immigrant To Be Tried for Daughter’s Death,” *The Associated Press*, Jan. 2, 2011, www.msnbc.msn.com/id/40878687/ns/us_news-crime_and_courts/.

An Iraqi immigrant in Arizona will be tried for allegedly killing his daughter for being too Westernized.

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“Between Honour Killings, Child Brides and Force Marriages,” *This Day* (Nigeria), Oct. 12, 2010, www.thisdaylive.com/articles/between-honour-killings-child-brides-and-forced-marriages/76808/.

Experts say any effective honor killing laws must have provisions specific to the crime and not just tied to a country’s penal code.

“Consensus Eludes GOM, Honour Killing Law Will Have to Wait,” *Economic Times* (India), Aug. 28, 2010, http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2010-08-28/news/27570501_1_honour-killings-caste-panchayats-khap-panchayats.

India’s ministers have been unable to introduce legislation to counter honor killings, largely because they cannot reach a consensus on the details.

“Sindh Assembly Passes Resolution Against Honour Killing,” *Pakistan Press International Information Services*, Nov. 5, 2010.

The Pakistani Provincial Assembly of Sindh has passed a resolution condemning recent honor killings and has urged the government to prosecute them as murder cases.

Lakshmi, Rama, “Battle of Clan, Caste, Culture and Cupid,” *Arab News*, May 25, 2010, p.A8, <http://arabnews.com/world/article58712.ece>.

Political fallout from a widely publicized honor killing has forced India’s lawmakers to revisit the country’s marriage rules.

CITING CQ GLOBAL RESEARCHER

Sample formats for citing these reports in a bibliography include the ones listed below. Preferred styles and formats vary, so please check with your instructor or professor.

MLA STYLE

Flamini, Roland. “Nuclear Proliferation.” *CQ Global Researcher* 1 Apr. 2007: 1-24.

APA STYLE

Flamini, R. (2007, April 1). Nuclear proliferation. *CQ Global Researcher*, 1, 1-24.

CHICAGO STYLE

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Voices From Abroad:

MARY JOHN

Director, Centre for
Women's Development
Studies, India

A betrayal of trust

"People pressured into killing believe they otherwise are betraying their community when, in fact, they are betraying their family. They are betraying their authority and the trust of young people in their care. These are guardians killing the young. By calling it 'honour killing,' you rationalise it when, in fact, you are the victim of so-called 'custom.' "

Times of India, June 2010

AHMED NAJDAWI

Attorney, Jordan

Inevitable remorse

"There is remorse, for sure. They commit these crimes, motivated by the cultural aspects. But when time calms them down, they feel regret. Nobody kills a wife or a sister or a daughter without later feeling remorse."

The Independent, September 2010

DHARMENDRA PATHAK

Father of honor killing
victim Nirupama Pathak
India

Part of our culture

"This is part and parcel of our culture, that you marry into your own caste. Every society has its own culture. Every society has its own traditions."

The New York Times, July 2010

AZZA SULEIMAN

Activist, Center for
Egyptian Women's
Legal Assistance, Egypt

A lenient law

"In Lebanon and Jordan, they have [laws] that specifically refer to 'honour' killings. But in Egypt, the judge believes he has a special authority, and Article 17 of the law allows judges to use clemency if they wish to reduce sentences — from 25 years, for example, to six months. The religious and traditional background of the judges affects them. . . . This provides leniency for the perpetrators."

*The Independent (U.K.)
September 2010*

SHEIKH HAMZA MANSOUR

Parliamentary Leader, Islamic
Action Front, Jordan

Issue is being exaggerated

"This whole issue is being exaggerated, and the reason behind it is not innocent. It's as if the government is giving up our personality to turn us into a Westernised society."

*Sunday Independent (Ireland)
December 2009*

JOHN AUSTIN

Member of Parliament,
United Kingdom

Unacceptable

"In Turkey the figures for 2007 show that over 200 women were killed here in the name

of family or community honor, and that is frankly unacceptable in a modern Europe."

Thai Press Reports, May 2009

MEWA SINGH MOR

President, Sarv Khap
(clan council), India

Destroying social fabric

"It is a shame that so many girls and boys are eloping nowadays, under the influence of TV and movies. Our constitution tells our youth what their rights are but says nothing about their social duties. These couples are like an epidemic. They are destroying our social fabric."

The Washington Post, May 2010

RAVINDER KAUR

Social Science Professor,
Indian Institute of Tech-
nology, India

The killers are relatives

"What shocks us about such murders is that they are perpetrated by close and trusted relatives, by those who we normally expect to love, nurture and protect us. Family murders strike at our self-image as a society of close-knit, resilient families in a world where we feel the family has largely self-destructed."

Indian Express, July 2010

GUMAN SINGH

Former Judge, Rajasthan
High Court, India

A comprehensive law

"The origin of honour

killing is not in enmity, rivalry or greed. . . . There is need to cover the entire gamut of this ghastly crime by including all the attendant acts of omission and commission leading to the offence."

The Hindu (India), August 2010

RONA AMBROSE

Minister for Status of
Women, Canada

Unacceptable in Canada

"People come to this country to enjoy and embrace the values and opportunities that Canada provides, and as a nation we are proud of the contributions made by our diverse cultural communities. However, killing or mutilating anyone, least of all a family member, is utterly unacceptable under all circumstances and will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

Canada Newswire, July 2010

BURAK OZUGERGIN

Spokesman, Ministry of
Foreign Affairs, Turkey

Turkey doing its part

"Turkey considered honour killings as a violation of human rights. Together with the United Kingdom, Turkey submitted a draft to the United Nations General Assembly in 2004 to prevent honour killings. Also, the new penal code which was approved by the Turkish parliament in 2004 . . . included many arrangements about gender equality."

*Anatolia (news agency)
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