

"Honor" Killings

The root of honor killings is centuries old and dates back to the Pre-Islamic era called Jahiliyah (Time of Ignorance before Mohammed). During that time men were encouraged to bury their infant daughters alive to avoid the possibility that they would dishonor the family.

The practice of honor killings has nothing to do with Islam or the Koran. The prophet Mohammed called for an end to it. Instead the practice has grown and spread throughout the world. There have been hundreds of reports in the Arabic countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, India and Bangladesh, West Bank of Israel and Jordan. Although not as common, honor killing has been also reported in many non Arabic countries like Brazil, Ecuador, Uganda and Britain.

An investigative report by Amnesty International states that honor killings are the most widespread in Pakistan where the concept of women as an object or commodity is deeply rooted in the tribal culture. The ancient custom of honour killing is well defined and condoned throughout society. *(note: the following description relates specifically to Pakistan and may not apply to other Arabic countries)*

In Pakistan women are considered property of the males in their family and, like livestock or property, they have monetary value. Women are almost always married by arrangement between families. The tribal customs dictate the property is to be kept within the family so women are often married to cousins or uncles, usually on the paternal side.

Upon marriage the woman is exchanged for a '*vulver*' or bride price which is paid by the groom to the father of the bride. It varies according to the status, health, beauty and age of the woman. Sometimes the bride price involves another woman. Men can exchange daughters, even unborn granddaughters, to obtain new wives for themselves.

Women are seen to embody the honour of the men to whom they belong. The culture casts the males as the sole protector of the female so he must have total control over her. While this specifically relates to sexual relations many men have interpreted this to include control over a women's earnings, attire and her social relationships with others. If his protection is violated he loses '*ghairat*' or honour because he failed to protect her. His '*izzat*' or standing in society is diminished.

A woman who engages in '*zina*' or unlawful sexual relations is branded '*kari*' or black. In order to cleanse the honour of the man who owns her she must be killed. A man who kills for reason of honour is '*ghairatmand*', both morally and legally supported by his tribesmen. The killings are often performed openly. A man who is unable to cleanse his family's honour is '*beghairat*' or without honour and considered socially impotent. After the women are killed their bodies are often thrown into rivers or buried in hidden graveyards. No one is permitted to grieve for them or honour their memory.

The man who engaged in sexual relations with the woman is branded '*karo*' which also means black. His family is not dishonoured instead they have gained social standing by captivating another man's wife or daughter.

Tribal law dictates that he should also be killed but usually the '*karo*' has the opportunity to flee while his family negotiates with the dishonoured family to save his

life. A '*faislo*' or agreement is set up by the '*sardars*' or tribal council leaders. The compensation includes '*khoon baha*' or blood money but can also involve the trade of another woman to the dishonoured family.

The Amnesty International reports states that this system does provide opportunities for personal profit. There are many cases of fake honour killings where rumours about a daughter or wife are circulated so that they can be killed just to obtain blood money or a new wife.

News reports from May 2004 indicate that as many as 449 individuals, have been murdered as *karo-kari* in 2004 The News (Jang Group). 18 May 2004.. Some 28 individuals are said to have been killed under the pretext of "honour" in Nawab Shah and its suburbs in Sindh province in one month alone! Frontier Post, 8 April 2004. In 2002, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan stated that 376 cases of "honour killings" were recorded over the year in the province of Sindh. These reports all indicate that the practise is by no means waning. It is important also to remember that reported incidents represent a fraction of those the total number of such cases.

Once declared *kari* a woman who survives attempts on her life, finds few safeguards under Pakistani law that enable her to seek shelter, legal aid and justice from constant threats, intimidation and incidents of targeted violence. Many women are hunted down as *kari* month, even years after they supposedly "shamed" their family.

A legal loophole that many perpetrators of "honour" killings escape punishment from is the Qisas and Diyat law. Under this law the family of the victim are allowed to pardon the perpetrator of the killing, and the individual is then free from legal proceedings and sentencing.

In many instances "honour" is used as an excuse to perpetrate crimes that stem from inter-family, land, and personal disputes. Since virtual impunity has existed for these crimes they are an easy cloak to hide behind without having the fear of criminal proceedings being brought.

Over the past two years, a noticeable debate has emerged in Pakistan calling for the practise of "honour" killing to be made a crime under the law and for it to be punished as murder. These debates have been welcomed by Amnesty International who has for many years called for such incidents to be treated as crimes under the national law. President Musharraf himself has been quoted as saying that "it is totally illegal" and that "we must deal with the culprits of honour killing most harshly" -AFP News Wire. 10/02/04.

In 2002, the governor of Sindh issued a draft bill to curb the practise of "honour" killings. In the same year a resolution to condemn and demand legislative action were also introduced both in the National and Sindh Assemblies. A bill put forward by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) called the Elimination of Gender Discrimination and the Protection and Empowerment of Women Bill 2004, addresses "honour" killings and also calls for the repeal of the Hudood Ordinances. However, none of these initiatives have led to new legal procedures against "honour" killings.

Sadly five years after AI issued a report on “honour” crimes a statement quoted in it by human rights activist, Hina Jilani’s still rings “the right to life of women in Pakistan is conditional on obeying social norms and traditions.” Until legislative changes are brought about and fully implemented the women of Pakistan will remain crippled by “honour