

CHAPTER 2



HONOR AND SHAME

Despite the best efforts of women's rights activists over the past decades, thousands of women around the world are killed every year for defying an unwritten patriarchal code of conduct. Many more are ostracized, like Rojin, or face unbearable pressure in their daily lives.

A conservative and much quoted United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimate suggests that at least 5,000 women are murdered every year in defense of "honor," or perhaps more accurately, in support of social mores that require girls to be obedient and chaste.

Often perceived in the West as an Islamic custom, honor killings are in fact a pre-Islamic tradition that prevailed in many countries for centuries and whose roots are lost in time. Today's perpetrators no doubt believe that they are acting to protect an abstract notion of honor they hold as sacred, but honor killings may initially have had a more practical purpose.

As scholar Leila Ahmed, who has written extensively about patriarchy, explained in her landmark book, as soon as tribes settled and began to acquire land and other assets, "the patriarchal family, designed to guarantee the paternity of property-heirs and vesting in men the control of female sexuality, became institutionalized, codified, and upheld by the state."¹

Until the discovery of DNA, men could never be entirely sure that their offspring were really theirs. Controlling women's sexuality and making sure that they did not marry outside the tribal group was therefore crucial to preserve the bloodline. Notions of honor and shame, drummed into young boys and girls, acted as social safeguards. To this day, many arranged marriages are commercial transactions that

involve two families exchanging money and goods over the heads of young women, who are themselves viewed as commodities.

“Women’s sexuality was designated the property of men, first of the woman’s father, then of her husband, and female sexual purity (virginity in particular) became negotiable, economically valuable property,” Ahmed wrote.

The Pakistani NGO Shirkat Gah defines crimes committed in the name of honor as

the killing of women to restore male honor and maintain patriarchal structures has been taking place for centuries in lands that were the cradles of world civilisations: in agrarian societies such as China and India (including present day Pakistan), in the tribal Arab Middle East, throughout the lands of the Mediterranean (in Palestine, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece, Morocco, Italy, Spain), in Southern Europe, as well as in Latin American countries across the Atlantic.”²

Today the link between the desire to keep land within the family and the notion of honor may appear more tenuous than in the past, yet the need to control women often stems from economic as well as moral reasons.

Honor killings tend to occur mainly in the Middle East, in South Asia, and in South America, as well as among migrant communities in Western countries. Until two or three decades ago they were still regularly reported in Mediterranean countries such as Greece, Spain, and Italy.

In the Middle East, the trace of honor can be found in the Code of Hammurabi, circa 1750 B.C., and in Assyrian laws introduced around 1100 B.C. Adulterous couples were punished with death and in some cases, men who committed rape were punished with the rape of their own wives.³

The notion that a rape can be erased if the rapist marries his victim still applies in many countries around the world: marital ties somehow restore the social balance upset by out-of-wedlock sexual interaction. Worst still, in the most patriarchal communities, a rape can even now be “compensated” by another sexual assault. A tragic story, which came to light in the eastern province of Van, in Turkey in 2006, demonstrates that this practice is alive.

Twenty-two-year-old Songul, who lived in a remote village near the Iranian border, was raped by a neighbor while her husband was away doing seasonal work. When a relative of his, Bahattin, found out about the rape, he tied Songul in a barn and tortured her for two days for dishonoring her husband, Mehmet, and his family.

Eventually, the village council of elders gathered to discuss how to deal with the matter. As was the case with Rojin, the suffering Songul had experienced at the hands of her rapist was irrelevant. What was important was to redeem her husband's honor.

The elders came up with what they thought was a fair solution: Songul and Mehmet's marriage would be dissolved and the young wife, who had been defiled, would be sent back to her parents' home. To soothe Mehmet's bruised pride, the rapist would give him his 16-year-old daughter in marriage, as compensation for the loss of his wife.

In short, this meant that one man committed the crime, but two women were punished for it. Songul was banished, while the rapist's teenaged daughter was married against her will.

Songul, pregnant from the rape, returned to her father's village, but her brother, rightly fearing for her life, decided to take her to a lawyer. The young woman lodged formal complaints against her rapist and her now ex-husband's relative who had tortured her. The prosecutor who took up her case, perhaps because he wasn't from the region or simply because he lacked sensitivity, failed to understand that she was in danger of being killed for not accepting the villagers' harsh verdict and fighting back in court.

Local women's rights activists sprang into action to protect Songul as well as the teenager who was meant to replace her as Mehmet's bride. They contacted the authorities, but they could find no official willing to respond to their desperate calls over the weekend. Eventually, the head of a local NGO, Zozan Özgökçe, intervened during a live phone-in television program and launched an emotional appeal to save the two women. That night, law enforcement officers took Songul and the rapist's daughter into protective custody and transferred them to a shelter, but the teenager had already been forcibly married to Songul's ex-husband. The men involved in the case were arrested to face prosecution.⁴

The code of honor shows variations from one region to the next, but the overall concept is remarkably similar. In Pakistan, a country where crimes committed in the name of honor are still regularly reported, the practice is thought to have originated in Baluchistan, before being imported to Sindh over the centuries by the Baluchi diaspora.⁵

What is clear is that honor killings have been occurring for centuries and pre-date the arrival of Islam. They are in fact in direct contradiction with the teachings of the Koran. The Muslim holy book takes a dim view of illicit sexual relations and recommends the stoning

of adulterers, male and female, but it requires four eye witnesses—a condition that should be almost impossible to meet—to confirm the conviction. Even adultery is not considered an excuse for personal justice: executions of adulterers can only be ordered by a court.

The UN figure of 5,000 provides a vague estimate that only reveals the tip of the iceberg. The patriarchal control exercised over women is pervasive and affects the lives of millions of women around the globe, in many different ways.

Obtaining accurate data is all the more difficult in that there is no universally accepted definition of “honor killings.” Human Rights Watch describes crimes committed in the name of honor as

acts of violence, usually murder, committed by male family members against female family members, who are held to have brought dishonor upon the family. A woman can be targeted by (individuals within) her family for a variety of reasons, including: refusing to enter into an arranged marriage, being the victim of a sexual assault, seeking a divorce—even from an abusive husband—or (allegedly) committing adultery. The mere perception that a woman has behaved in a specific way to “dishonor” her family, is sufficient to trigger an attack.⁶

Palestinian-American scholar Lama Abu Odeh⁷ describes murders committed in the name of honor as the “killing of a women by her father or brother for engaging in, or being suspected of engaging in, sexual practices before or outside marriage.”

Personally, I find this definition too restrictive. In several cases I came across, the sexual element, even as an allegation, was missing altogether. Interpretation may differ from one region to the next, but honor is not only invoked in cases of premeditated ritual killings committed in patriarchal communities by the victim’s blood relatives. I found that defiance and disobedience were as common a thread linking the murders as sexual misconduct, and in some cases, women were at risk simply because their existence was socially inconvenient for their male relatives. The “honor” motive was sometimes an afterthought that allowed perpetrators to get away with their crime.

For the purpose of this book, I therefore broadened the scope of my study to look at various forms of discrimination against women that can lead to their death, on the pretext that they have sullied their family’s “honor.”

In Turkey, where I have lived for over two decades, murders committed as a result of a collective decision taken by the family or by a tribal court are often labeled “customs killings” (*töre cinayetleri*). Under Turkey’s Penal Code, revised in 2005, these are the only crimes

committed in the name of honor that call for a mandatory life sentence due to aggravated circumstances.

Also falling under the umbrella of honor killing in the view of many activists—but unfortunately not defined as such under Turkish law—are murders committed by individuals, usually husbands or lovers, who suspect that their partner is involved in an illicit relationship or who refuse to accept that their partner wants to end their relationship. When they strike to express their rage, they too usually claim to have done so to redeem their honor and reputation.

In communities where “ownership” of a woman is seen as passing from her family to her husband when she marries, the spouse, rather than a blood relative, may become the enforcer if she is perceived to have offended the social order. He can also ask his wife’s brothers to take action.

The dividing line between “honor killings” and murders known in Western countries as “crimes of passion,” committed in a fit of anger or jealousy, becomes very thin in such cases.

I would argue that many crimes labeled domestic murders in the West could easily fit into the broader category of “crimes committed in the name of honor.” The discourse and the vocabulary are clearly different: Western men are unlikely to use honor as a defense, but acts of murder committed by male partners are often motivated by a hurt pride or a desire to control a woman who spurned them.

A good example would be the famous case of O.J. Simpson, the famous American footballer, who was acquitted of the double murder of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her lover, Ronald Goldman, in a controversial trial in 1995 but was later found guilty of their wrongful deaths in a civil court case. During the trial it emerged that O.J. Simpson had often humiliated and pressured his much younger wife, Nicole, publicly. He was known to be overbearing in his relationships with women and was used to calling the shots. When Nicole eventually filed for divorce and started dating other men, he could not accept that she had escaped from his clutches.

Violence against women is a universal scourge, and one that takes many forms according to the local social, cultural, and political environment. In Western societies, we like to think that women are “liberated” and we are quick to spot unfamiliar harmful practices such as honor killings or dowry deaths that take place in foreign cultures. But statistics provide shocking evidence that domestic violence, rapes, and killings are still common and even on the rise in Western societies. The extent of homegrown violence against women in Western democracies is often overlooked.

For instance, the British authorities believe that 10–12 honor killings take place among migrant families in the United Kingdom every year, but up to 120 women are killed every year by their partners or ex-partners in domestic murders.

“Patriarchal violence is universal. It is both Eastern and Western. In the West, where feminist knowledge emerged, anti-feminism continues to be dominant in popular culture,” write scholars Shahrzad Mojab and Nahla Abdo. “While identifying male violence as a problem of non-Western societies is a racist claim, it is true that there is an unleashing of male violence in certain parts of the world, especially in North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.”⁸

The main difference between “honor killings” and the “crimes of passion” described in the penal codes of Western democracies—and it is a substantial difference—lies in the social context: domestic murders and crimes of passion are usually received with revulsion, whereas honor killings are still tolerated or even encouraged in some parts of the world.

This latest claim should perhaps be written in the past tense because a growing number of human rights defenders are working to remove this social cover and expose brutal crimes committed in the name of honor for what they really are: the suppression of women’s freedom to make their own choices and the ultimate violation of their right to live.

UN data on honor killings can only be seen as a rough estimate, and so also national statistics on honor killings, which are partial at best in the countries where the murders occur.

In Turkey, a police report put at 1,091 the number of crimes committed in the name of honor and customs between 2000 and 2005,⁹ but the survey gave no gender distribution of the victims nor did it provide a clear definition of these crimes. The report was also limited to the activities of the police force, which only operates in urban areas. In Turkey, policing of rural areas is the responsibility of the gendarmerie, a semi-military force linked to the Ministry of Interior, whose own data, if it exists, has not been made public.

The Aurat foundation of Pakistan estimated that 1,317 women had fallen victim to violence in 2007. Two hundred and ten of them, as well as 117 men, were accused of being *karo kari*, an expression that means “black man, black woman” and is used to describe couples engaged in illicit relations. A report on Pakistan published by the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2005 mentions official figures, quoted by ministers in the Pakistani Senate in July 2004, suggesting that *karo*

kari “had claimed the lives of 4,000 men and women in the country during the last six years. From January 1998 to December 2003, the number of women killed in the name of honor was more than double the number of men murdered.”¹⁰

Both “partners-in-sin” are at risk when they are thus labeled in rural Pakistan, but men can often pay compensation and buy their way out of trouble.

In Jordan, some 20 girls are killed every year by their relatives.

In India, too, up to 1,000 honor killings are committed every year and they prevail among Hindus as well as Muslims. Although the traditional Hindu caste system that defined social relations in India has officially been abolished in the country, it still plays a key role in community relations, particularly in the countryside. Honor is invoked to justify murder mainly when strict rules banning relationships between individuals of different social castes are violated. Another, even more common form of violence against women in India is the dowry death. According to the National Crime Records Bureau in India, more than 6,000 women were killed every year between 2001 and 2005 for failing to satisfy their in-laws’ demands for dowry funds and assets.¹¹

In the broad scope of violence against women, honor killings stand out because they are often carried out by the parents or close relatives of the victims. They are patriarchy’s instrument of last resort, a blunt tool wielded not only to punish individuals for perceived infractions of the social code of conduct, but also to send a powerful message to others who might be tempted to stray away from the narrow path laid out by the male elders.

“A woman is like an olive tree. When its branch catches woodworm, it has to be chopped off so that society stays clean and pure,” Tarrad Fayiz, a Jordanian tribal leader told a BBC reporter.¹²

Many activists object to the term “honor killing,” arguing that putting the two words side by side amounts to accepting and glorifying an interpretation of honor used to police women’s behavior and often grossly abused. There is obviously nothing honorable about killing defenseless women.

Finding a suitable term to replace “honor killings” is not easy. “Crimes committed in the name of honor” might be a more adequate description, even if it still refers to the problematic notion of “honor.” Whenever “honor” is mentioned in this book as linked to women’s behavior, it should be seen as framed by inverted commas: it is not the victims who behave dishonorably, but those who hound and kill them.

It is tempting to dismiss the notion of honor as “a useful fiction in preserving male dominance,”¹³ but the concept remains so real to

many people around the world that it cannot be rejected outright as meaningless. Gross miscarriages of justice and extrajudicial executions are committed in its name, on the basis of the flimsiest of evidence. It is also used to cover up ordinary murders or justify greed and abuse. But to understand how families can come to kill their daughters, their understanding of honor, however misguided, and the roots of their attachment to it deserve to be examined closely.

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During my visits to rural areas where “honor” still ruled, I often experienced a strange duality. At first glance, the world my interlocutors inhabited appeared very remote from my own: the women I talked to often had little power of decision over their own lives and their fate was largely in the hands of others, while I felt, by and large, free to make my own choices and operate with a large degree of independence.

But their life stories resonated within me at a deeper level, creating a sense of sisterly connection that crossed borders and cultures. Patriarchy, in various forms, is alive in the most developed societies. It does not impose its rule in the same unrelenting way, but it still makes itself felt on a regular basis.

To most Westerners today, honor comes across as a rather old-fashioned word that conjures up images of knights and noblemen throwing down the gauntlet and dueling to death to salvage their pride. Not exactly the stuff of modern life.

But millions of people around the world are still brought up with the notion that honor is a fundamental part of their own identity and the bond that ties their community. For those living in tribal or tight-knit communities, linked by blood ties, honor can at times be unforgiving but it remains a crucial value.

“In its purest and most desirable form, honor is an integral dimension of Eastern culture, where one’s honorable deeds are looked on as a valued possession,” wrote sociologists Aysan Sev’er and Gökçicek Yurdakul.¹⁴

But when it is built around the notion that a man’s pride and respectability lie in his ability to protect his womenfolk and ensure that they remain chaste, honor can also become a lethal weapon.

The twin concepts of honor and shame (its opposite) exist in all cultures but the communal values that retain a major importance in many developing societies have given way to individualism in the West. Today, in Europe or in the United States, the interests of the extended family rarely trump those of the individual. On the other hand, more

people in developed countries suffer from loneliness or feel isolated. And a woman's sexual behavior is still more likely to come under scrutiny and be criticized than a man's.

Peter Mullan's powerful 2002 film, *The Magdalene Sisters*, was a useful reminder that the sexual emancipation of women in western countries was achieved only recently. The movie retraced the true stories of three "fallen" Irish young women—three among thousands who ended up in church-run asylums, condemned by their families to a life of shame and drudgery.

It emerged in the late 1990s that in the course of the 150 years the Magdalene laundries were in operation in Ireland, some 30,000 young Irish women had been locked up in these workhouses, run with an iron hand by unforgiving nuns. Unlike "honor killing" victims, the young women were not murdered, but they were cut off from society, locked up, and effectively buried alive in these bleak institutions. They were required to do hard labor in church-run laundries to expiate their "sins." Some of these young women were deemed too free-spirited for the traditional and religious society they lived in; others had become pregnant out of wedlock and had to be hidden away for fear that they might corrupt the moral fabric of society. The babies they gave birth to were forcibly taken away from them and sent off for adoption. Their fate was, in fact, not very different from Rojin's own.

The fate of these inmates, invisible to the rest of society, had rarely been talked about until several bodies were discovered in 1993 in a former laundry that had been sold to a property developer. After further investigation, the remains of 155 former inmates were found buried in unnamed graves on the site. Forgotten by all, including by their own relatives, they had died within the walls of these institutions. The last Magdalene institution closed down in 1996.

The scandal was a stark reminder that, until recently, some Western European communities, often under the influence of the church, were taking extreme measures against young women perceived as leading a dissolute life. A girl's "bad behavior" did not just affect her own life, but tainted those around her. To prevent the rot from spreading, the offender needed to be isolated, physically and socially.

The shunning of these girls stemmed from a mentality similar to the one that even today condones killing in the name of honor. Heterosexual relations are rarely met with such intolerance in Western societies today, but homosexuality still triggers strong reactions and at times violence from conservative elements in our liberal societies.

In countries where gruesome traditional killings are tolerated, honor occupies such an important place in life that a rich vocabulary is

usually available to describe it. In Turkish, for instance, there is a clear distinction between *onur* (close to the Western definition of honor), *şeref* (derived from an achieved status), and *gurur* (closer to pride). *Namus* is the killer: this is the form of honor that is directly linked to women's chastity, and it is the one that affects men through their female relatives.

In Arabic, too, there is a distinction between *sharaf* (social prestige) and *'ird* (linked to women's chastity). In Urdu and Sindhi, languages spoken in Pakistan, honor that comes through chaste behavior also deserves separate terms like *ghairat* and *izzat*.

Honor tends to be a male attribute, while shame belongs to women. This dichotomy has been used throughout the world for centuries to justify male dominance over women: the honor/shame system is an ideology of power.

Male relatives are not the only enforcers of social rules. In many cases, the extended family, women included, is mobilized to protect social mores. If a family is not swift enough to act when its honor is at stake, the wider community will exert pressure, often refusing interaction with members of "the tainted group" to remind them of their traditional duty.

Former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women Radhika Coomaraswamy noted that "in many instances, women and girl children are subjected to violence by their communities because of their sexuality and sexual behaviour. A key component of community identity, and therefore the demarcation of community boundaries, is the preservation of communal honor. Such honor is frequently perceived, by both community and non-community members, as residing in the sexual behaviour of the women of the community. Communities, therefore, 'police' the behaviour of their female members."¹⁵

Law enforcement officials, when they do bother to investigate these cases, face a challenge to find the real culprits and arrest them. "Honor killings" in their traditional form are a type of organized crime. An entire community is often involved and maintains silence about the events. This unwillingness to speak out may not quite match the *omerta*, or code of silence, of the Sicilian mafia, but it comes close to it.

Women can be accused of disgracing their family if they do not behave according to the received norms. The honor gained through chaste or modest behavior is not theirs alone to keep: it will be bestowed on the men in their family, and will then trickle down to all members of the group, who will benefit from the reflected glory of belonging to a "respectable" family.

Protecting a girl's virginity until she dutifully marries the groom chosen by her family is a task entrusted to all male members of the clan, especially her brothers. If an illicit affair occurs, the male partner is sometimes killed as well, although in many communities monetary compensation can convince angry relatives to spare a man's life.

Killing a man is more onerous and can trigger blood feuds between families that can last generations. Accepting compensation is therefore a face-saving way to avoid a bloodbath. Another common practice is to hand over a girl from the offending family in compensation. Usually very young, entirely innocent, she, in turn, becomes a victim of the "honor" system.

Most interpretations of honor codes share the common element that they revolve around women. "*Namus* is located between a woman's legs," says Mehmet Faraç bluntly. He is a Turkish journalist and politician who authored a book detailing several murders committed in his native province of Urfa, one of the most conservative areas of Turkey.

Faraç's crude definition comes close to the mark: honor is linked to a woman's reputation for purity and her menfolk's ability to protect it. But illicit relations are not the only trigger for violence—leaving the house without a male kin's permission can lead to neighbors questioning a woman's reputation. Being too feisty and attracting too much attention can also be dangerous.

Some cases are extreme: 16-year-old Hacer was killed by her 15-year-old brother in the Turkish city of Urfa, in March 1994, because a friend had dedicated a song to her on a radio phone-in program. The family ruled that she deserved to die. One husband in Pakistan killed his wife after dreaming during the night that she was having an affair.¹⁶

In her groundbreaking research on Bedouins in Egypt,¹⁷ anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod explains that, among the Awlad 'Ali tribespeople she studied, honor "derives from virtues associated with autonomy."¹⁸

Men have to display independence and self-control in order to gain the respect of their peers. A man who shows too much attachment to one of his wives, for instance, is perceived as weak and unworthy. As Abu-Lughod points out, "women are always dependents" since "Bedouin ideology holds that they are 'ruled' by men and should be obedient."

Modesty and humility then become means of gaining moral worth in the eyes of the community: "those who are coerced into obeying are scorned, but those who voluntarily defer are honorable."

Killing a loved one to defend one's honor may appear to go against every human instinct, but notions of honor and shame, drilled into little boys and girls from a very early age, are often so deeply ingrained that relatives feel that they have no choice. If they hesitate and are reluctant to kill, the community around them will remind them daily of their failings.

Girls naturally learn from a young age to cover their body in loose clothes, to defer to their elders, and to keep their eyes lowered.

In Pakistan, while visiting the Sindhi countryside, I noticed that few little girls were among the young children playing in the dust and chasing each other in the hamlets we visited or drove through. The rare exceptions were usually no older than five years. When I asked why this was the case, I was told that girls usually stayed at home. Their childhood ends when they are barely out of infancy.

Pakistani women's rights activist Nafisa Shah, who is also an elected district official and a member of a prominent family in Sindh, wrote in a thesis focusing on crimes committed in the name of honor in her state¹⁹ that when she visited villages in her region, she was usually given a male escort. Sometimes the escort in question was a five-year-old boy, who would be hard-pressed to provide protection, yet his presence was necessary to preserve the decorum.

Patriarchy is defined as the rule of men, but it co-opts women and children to ensure the implementation of its strict diktat. Coercive methods are used when necessary to guarantee that no one strays.

Crimes are committed in the name of honor in all social classes but poorer folks may feel that they have no options. "Honor is the only possession of the poor. They do not want to lose it," believes Mehmet Faraç. Richer families can find alternatives to killing: a girl who has been "disgraced" can be discreetly sent away before a scandal erupts or money can change hands to find a willing groom. Financial transactions are particularly common to avoid the killing of a man who has transgressed social rules.

"There is an economic dimension to honor crimes. One girl was raped in a poor family. Her brother sold his wife's gold to get her an abortion, but the doctors asked for a higher amount because abortion is illegal. Unable to pay, he bought a pistol instead and shot her with 8 bullets. Rich people can surgically restore the virginity if necessary or go abroad to deliver a child or pay money to buy a husband," lawyer and activist Asma Khader told me when I met her in Amman, Jordan, in 2002. She later became a state minister.

Ms. Khader also pointed out that people living in close proximity in poorer areas made it "easier for secrets to come out." In a big city,

families determined not to bow to tradition stood a better chance of doing so, but the activist pointed out that “the pressure exists for all.”²⁰

What makes “honor” crimes particularly odious is the fact that they are usually committed in cold blood by the very people who should have nurtured and protected the victims: fathers, brothers, cousins, or even mothers.

In this traditional pattern that violates the woman’s most basic right to life, the decision is often taken collectively by the tribe or the extended family, and the victim is rarely given a chance to defend herself. Even if she was raped, the suspicion that her behavior must have invited the assault is enough to condemn her.

In many cases, autopsies carried out on the bodies of young victims accused of having an affair reveal that the accused was in fact a virgin.

Guilt does not have to be established to justify execution: being the focus of rumors, even if they are malicious and untrue, is often enough to seal a woman’s fate. The entire system rests on the “natural” superiority of men and their right to impose their will on family members. Women marry the candidate chosen by their family and are expected to accept their fate. Girls who show defiance can be beaten into submission.

For every honor murder that is reported, many more are disguised as accidents or suicides, and for every woman who is killed, there are dozens who live in fear and face the constant threat of violence.

Honor killings have survived across continents, through the millennia, because they do not happen in a vacuum: they are the logical conclusion in a social system where women’s chastity and obedience are the main currencies and blood ties are usually the social glue holding the community fabric together.

As Nafisa Shah points out, “what we may think is a murder or a crime against the state, in the honor value system is not a crime at all. On the contrary, it is an act of punishing those who violate the honor code.”²¹