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“Honour Killings”: The crimewave that shames the world

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It's one of the last great taboos: the murder of at least 20,000 women a year in the name of 'honour'. Nor is the problem confined to the Middle East: the contagion is spreading rapidly.

See also:

[Jordan: One woman's nightmare, and a crime against humanity](#)

[Lahore: Relatives with blood on their hands](#)

It is a tragedy, a horror, a crime against humanity. The details of the murders – of the women beheaded, burned to death, stoned to death, stabbed, electrocuted, strangled and buried alive for the “honour” of their families – are as barbaric as they are shameful. Many women's groups in the Middle East and South-west Asia suspect the victims are at least four times the United Nations' latest world figure of around 5,000 deaths a year. Most of the victims are young, many are teenagers, slaughtered under a vile tradition that goes back hundreds of years but which now spans half the globe.

A 10-month investigation by The Independent in Jordan, Pakistan, Egypt, Gaza and the West Bank has unearthed terrifying details of murder most foul. Men are also killed for “honour” and, despite its identification by journalists as a largely Muslim practice, Christian and Hindu communities have stooped to the same crimes. Indeed, the “honour” (or ird) of families, communities and tribes transcends religion and human mercy. But voluntary women's groups, human rights organisations, Amnesty International and news archives suggest that the slaughter of the innocent for “dishonouring” their families is increasing by the year.

Iraqi Kurds, Palestinians in Jordan, Pakistan and Turkey appear to be the worst offenders but media freedoms in these countries may over-compensate for the secrecy which surrounds “honour” killings in Egypt – which untruthfully claims there are none – and other Middle East nations in the Gulf and the Levant. But honour crimes long ago spread to Britain, Belgium, Russia and Canada and many other nations. Security authorities and courts across much of the Middle East have connived in reducing or abrogating prison sentences for the family murder of women, often classifying them as suicides to prevent prosecutions.

It is difficult to remain unemotional at the vast and detailed catalogue of these crimes. How should one react to a man – this has happened in both Jordan and Egypt – who rapes his own daughter and then, when she becomes pregnant, kills her to save the “honour” of his family? Or the Turkish father and grandfather of a 16-year-old girl, Medine Mehmi, in the province of Adiyaman, who was buried

alive beneath a chicken coop in February for “befriending boys”? Her body was found 40 days later, in a sitting position and with her hands tied.

Or Aisha Ibrahim Duhulow, 13, who in Somalia in 2008, in front of a thousand people, was dragged to a hole in the ground – all the while screaming, “I’m not going – don’t kill me” – then buried up to her neck and stoned by 50 men for adultery? After 10 minutes, she was dug up, found to be still alive and put back in the hole for further stoning. Her crime? She had been raped by three men and, fatally, her family decided to report the facts to the Al-Shabab militia that runs Kismayo. Or the Al-Shabab Islamic “judge” in the same country who announced the 2009 stoning to death of a woman – the second of its kind the same year – for having an affair? Her boyfriend received a mere 100 lashes.

Or the young woman found in a drainage ditch near Daharki in Pakistan, “honour” killed by her family as she gave birth to her second child, her nose, ears and lips chopped off before being axed to death, her first infant lying dead among her clothes, her newborn’s torso still in her womb, its head already emerging from her body? She was badly decomposed; the local police were asked to bury her. Women carried the three to a grave, but a Muslim cleric refused to say prayers for her because it was “irreligious” to participate in the namaz-e-janaza prayers for “a cursed woman and her illegitimate children”.

So terrible are the details of these “honour” killings, and so many are the women who have been slaughtered, that the story of each one might turn horror into banality. But lest these acts – and the names of the victims, when we are able to discover them – be forgotten, here are the sufferings of a mere handful of women over the past decade, selected at random, country by country, crime after crime.

Last March, Munawar Gul shot and killed his 20-year-old sister, Saanga, in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan, along with the man he suspected was having “illicit relations” with her, Aslam Khan.

In August of 2008, five women were buried alive for “honour crimes” in Baluchistan by armed tribesmen; three of them – Hameeda, Raheema and Fauzia – were teenagers who, after being beaten and shot, were thrown still alive into a ditch where they were covered with stones and earth. When the two older women, aged 45 and 38, protested, they suffered the same fate. The three younger women had tried to choose their own husbands. In the Pakistani parliament, the MP Israrullah Zehri referred to the murders as part of a “centuries-old tradition” which he would “continue to defend”.

In December 2003, a 23-year-old woman in Multan, identified only as Afsheen, was murdered by her father because, after an unhappy arranged marriage, she ran off with a man called Hassan who was from a rival, feuding tribe. Her family was educated – they included civil servants, engineers and lawyers. “I gave her sleeping pills in a cup of tea and then strangled her with a dapatta [a long scarf, part of a woman’s traditional dress],” her father confessed. He told the police: “Honour is the only thing a man has. I can still hear her screams, she was my favourite daughter. I want to destroy my hands and end my life.” The family had found Afsheen with Hassan in Rawalpindi and promised she would not be harmed if she returned home. They were lying.

Zakir Hussain Shah slit the throat of his daughter Sabiha, 18, at Bara Kau in June 2002 because she had “dishonoured” her family. But under Pakistan’s notorious qisas law, heirs have powers to pardon a murderer. In this case, Sabiha’s mother and brother “pardoned” the father and he was freed. When a man killed his four sisters in Mardan in the same year, because they wanted a share of his inheritance, his mother “pardoned” him under the same law. In Sarghoda around the same time, a man opened fire on female members of his family, killing two of his daughters. Yet again, his wife –

and several other daughters wounded by him – “pardoned” the murderer because they were his heirs.

Outrageously, rape is also used as a punishment for “honour” crimes. In Meerwala village in the Punjab in 2002, a tribal “jury” claimed that an 11-year-old boy from the Gujar tribe, Abdul Shakoor, had been walking unchaperoned with a 30-year-old woman from the Mastoi tribe, which “dishonoured” the Mastois. The tribal elders decided that to “return” honour to the group, the boy’s 18-year-old sister, Mukhtaran Bibi, should be gang-raped. Her father, warned that all the female members of his family would be raped if he did not bring Mukhtar to them, dutifully brought his daughter to this unholy “jury”. Four men, including one of the “jury”, immediately dragged the girl to a hut and raped her while up to a hundred men laughed and cheered outside. She was then forced to walk naked through the village to her home. It took a week before the police even registered the crime – as a “complaint”.

Acid attacks also play their part in “honour” crime punishments. The Independent itself gave wide coverage in 2001 to a Karachi man called Bilal Khar who poured acid over his wife Fakhra Yunus’s face after she left him and returned to her mother’s home in the red-light area of the city. The acid fused her lips, burned off her hair, melted her breasts and an ear, and turned her face into “a look of melted rubber”. That same year, a 20-year-old woman called Hafiza was shot twice by her brother, Asadullah, in front of a dozen policemen outside a Quetta courthouse because she had refused to follow the tradition of marrying her dead husband’s elder brother. She had then married another man, Fayyaz Moon, but police arrested the girl and brought her back to her family in Quetta on the pretext that the couple could formally marry there. But she was forced to make a claim that Fayaz had kidnapped and raped her. It was when she went to court to announce that her statement was made under pressure – and that she still regarded Fayaz as her husband – that Asadullah murdered her. He handed his pistol to a police constable who had witnessed the killing.

One of the most terrible murders in 1999 was that of a mentally retarded 16-year-old, Lal Jamilla Mandokhel, who was reportedly raped by a junior civil servant in Parachinar in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan. Her uncle filed a complaint with the police but handed Lal over to her tribe, whose elders decided she should be killed to preserve tribal “honour”. She was shot dead in front of them. Arbab Khatoon was raped by three men in the Jacobabad district. She filed a complaint with the police. Seven hours later, she was murdered by relatives who claimed she had “dishonoured” them by reporting the crime.

Over 10 years ago, Pakistan’s Human Rights Commission was recording “honour” killings at the rate of a thousand a year. But if Pakistan seems to have the worst track record of “honour” crimes – and we must remember that many countries falsely claim to have none – Turkey might run a close second. According to police figures between 2000 and 2006, a reported 480 women – 20 per cent of them between the ages of 19 and 25 – were killed in “honour” crimes and feuds. Other Turkish statistics, drawn up more than five years ago by women’s groups, suggest that at least 200 girls and women are murdered every year for “honour”. These figures are now regarded as a vast underestimate. Many took place in Kurdish areas of the country; an opinion poll found that 37 per cent of Diyarbakir’s citizens approved of killing a woman for an extramarital affair. Medine Mehmi, the girl who was buried alive, lived in the Kurdish town of Kahta.

In 2006, authorities in the Kurdish area of South-east Anatolia were recording that a woman tried to commit suicide every few weeks on the orders of her family. Others were stoned to death, shot, buried alive or strangled. A 17-year-old woman called Derya who fell in love with a boy at her school received a text message from her uncle on her mobile phone. It read: “You have blackened our name. Kill yourself and clean our shame or we will kill you first.” Derya’s aunt had been killed by her grandfather for an identical reason. Her brothers also sent text messages, sometimes 15 a day.

Derya tried to carry out her family's wishes. She jumped into the Tigris river, tried to hang herself and slashed her wrists – all to no avail. Then she ran away to a women's shelter.

It took 13 years before Murat Kara, 40, admitted in 2007 that he had fired seven bullets into his younger sister after his widowed mother and uncles told him to kill her for eloping with her boyfriend. Before he murdered his sister in the Kurdish city of Dyabakir, neighbours had refused to talk to Murat Kara and the imam said he was disobeying the word of God if he did not kill his sister. So he became a murderer. Honour restored.

In his book *Women In The Grip Of Tribal Customs*, a Turkish journalist, Mehmet Farac, records the "honour" killing of five girls in the late 1990s in the province of Sanliurfa. Two of them – one was only 12 – had their throats slit in public squares, two others had tractors driven over them, the fifth was shot dead by her younger brother. One of the women who had her throat cut was called Sevda Gok. Her brothers held her arms down as her adolescent cousin cut her throat.

But the "honour" killing of women is not a uniquely Kurdish crime, even if it is committed in rural areas of the country. In 2001, Sait Kina stabbed his 13-year-old daughter to death for talking to boys in the street. He attacked her in the bathroom with an axe and a kitchen knife. When the police discovered her corpse, they found the girl's head had been so mutilated that the family had tied it together with a scarf. Sait Kina told the police: "I have fulfilled my duty."

In the same year, an Istanbul court reduced a sentence against three brothers from life imprisonment to between four and 12 years after they threw their sister to her death from a bridge after accusing her of being a prostitute. The court concluded that her behaviour had "provoked" the murder. For centuries, virginity tests have been considered a normal part of rural tradition before a woman's marriage. In 1998, when five young women attempted suicide before these tests, the Turkish family affairs minister defended mandated medical examinations for girls in foster homes.

British Kurdish Iraqi campaigner Aso Kamal, of the Doaa Network Against Violence, believes that between 1991 and 2007, 12,500 women were murdered for reasons of "honour" in the three Kurdish provinces of Iraq alone – 350 of them in the first seven months of 2007, for which there were only five convictions. Many women are ordered by their families to commit suicide by burning themselves with cooking oil. In Sulimaniya hospital in 2007, surgeons were treating many women for critical burns which could never have been caused by cooking "accidents" as the women claimed. One patient, Sirwa Hassan, was dying of 86 per cent burns. She was a Kurdish mother of three from a village near the Iranian border. In 2008, a medical officer in Sulimaniya told the AFP news agency that in May alone, 14 young women had been murdered for "honour" crimes in 10 days. In 2000, Kurdish authorities in Sulimaniya had decreed that "the killing or abuse of women under the pretext of cleansing 'shame' is not considered to be a mitigating excuse". The courts, they said, could not apply an old 1969 law "to reduce the penalty of the perpetrator". The new law, of course, made no difference.

But again, in Iraq, it is not only Kurds who believe in "honour" killings. In Tikrit, a young woman in the local prison sent a letter to her brother in 2008, telling him that she had become pregnant after being raped by a prison guard. The brother was permitted to visit the prison, walked into the cell where his now visibly pregnant sister was held, and shot her dead to spare his family "dishonour". The mortuary in Baghdad took DNA samples from the woman's foetus and also from guards at the Tikrit prison. The rapist was a police lieutenant-colonel. The reason for the woman's imprisonment was unclear. One report said the colonel's family had "paid off" the woman's relatives to escape punishment.

In Basra in 2008, police were reporting that 15 women a month were being murdered for breaching

“Islamic dress codes”. One 17-year-old girl, Rand Abdel-Qader, was beaten to death by her father two years ago because she had become infatuated with a British soldier. Another, Shawbo Ali Rauf, 19, was taken by her family to a picnic in Dokan and shot seven times because they had found an unfamiliar number on her mobile phone.

In Nineveh, Du’a Khalil Aswad was 17 when she was stoned to death by a mob of 2,000 men for falling in love with a man outside her tribe.

In Jordan, women’s organisations say that per capita, the Christian minority in this country of just over five million people are involved in more “honour” killings than Muslims – often because Christian women want to marry Muslim men. But the Christian community is loath to discuss its crimes and the majority of known cases of murder are committed by Muslims. Their stories are wearily and sickeningly familiar. Here is Sirhan in 1999, boasting of the efficiency with which he killed his young sister, Suzanne. Three days after the 16-year-old had told police she had been raped, Sirhan shot her in the head four times. “She committed a mistake, even if it was against her will,” he said. “Anyway, it’s better to have one person die than to have the whole family die of shame.” Since then, a deeply distressing pageant of “honour” crimes has been revealed to the Jordanian public, condemned by the royal family and slowly countered with ever tougher criminal penalties by the courts.

Yet in 2001, we find a 22-year-old Jordanian man strangling his 17-year-old married sister – the 12th murder of its kind in seven months – because he suspected her of having an affair. Her husband lived in Saudi Arabia. In 2002, Souad Mahmoud strangled his own sister for the same reason. She had been forced to marry her lover – but when the family found out she had been pregnant before her wedding, they decided to execute her.

In 2005, three Jordanians stabbed their 22-year-old married sister to death for taking a lover. After witnessing the man enter her home, the brothers stormed into the house and killed her. They did not harm her lover.

By March 2008, the Jordanian courts were still treating “honour” killings leniently. That month, the Jordanian Criminal Court sentenced two men for killing close female relatives “in a fit of fury” to a mere six months and three months in prison. In the first case, a husband had found a man in his home with his wife and suspected she was having an affair. In the second, a man shot dead his 29-year-old married sister for leaving home without her husband’s consent and “talking to other men on her mobile phone”. In 2009, a Jordanian man confessed to stabbing his pregnant sister to death because she had moved back to her family after an argument with her husband; the brother believed she was “seeing other men”.

And so it goes on. Three men in Amman stabbing their 40-year-old divorced sister 15 times last year for taking a lover; a Jordanian man charged with stabbing to death his daughter, 22, with a sword because she was pregnant outside wedlock. Many of the Jordanian families were originally Palestinian. Nine months ago, a Palestinian stabbed his married sister to death because of her “bad behaviour”. But last month, the Amman criminal court sentenced another sister-killer to 10 years in prison, rejecting his claim of an “honour” killing – but only because there were no witnesses to his claim that she had committed adultery.

In “Palestine” itself, Human Rights Watch has long blamed the Palestinian police and justice system for the near-total failure to protect women in Gaza and the West Bank from “honour” killings. Take, for example, the 17-year-old girl who was strangled by her older brother in 2005 for becoming pregnant – by her own father.

He was present during her murder. She had earlier reported her father to the police. They neither arrested nor interrogated him. In the same year, masked Hamas gunmen shot dead a 20-year-old, Yusra Azzami, for “immoral behaviour” as she spent a day out with her fiancée. Azzami was a Hamas member, her husband-to-be a member of Fatah. Hamas tried to apologise and called the dead woman a “martyr” – to the outrage of her family. Yet only last year, long after Hamas won the Palestinian elections and took over the Gaza Strip, a Gaza man was detained for bludgeoning his daughter to death with an iron chain because he discovered she owned a mobile phone on which he feared she was talking to a man outside the family. He was later released.

Even in liberal Lebanon, there are occasional “honour” killings, the most notorious that of a 31-year-old woman, Mona Kaham, whose father entered her bedroom and cut her throat after learning she had been made pregnant by her cousin. He walked to the police station in Roueiss in the southern suburbs of Beirut with the knife still in his hand. “My conscience is clear,” he told the police. “I have killed to clean my honour.” Unsurprisingly, a public opinion poll showed that 90.7 per cent of the Lebanese public opposed “honour” crimes. Of the few who approved of them, several believed that it helped to limit interreligious marriage.

Syria reflects the pattern of Lebanon. While civil rights groups are demanding a stiffening of the laws against women-killers, government legislation only raised the term of imprisonment for men who kill female relatives for extramarital sex to two years. Among the most recent cases was that of Lubna, a 17-year-old living in Homs, murdered by her family because she fled to her sister’s house after refusing to marry a man they had chosen for her. They also believed – wrongly – that she was no longer a virgin.

Tribal feuds often provoke “honour” killings in Iran and Afghanistan. In Iran, for example, a governor’s official in the ethnic Arab province of Khuzestan stated in 2003 that 45 young women under the age of 20 had been murdered in “honour” killings in just two months, none of which brought convictions. All were slaughtered because of the girl’s refusal to agree to an arranged marriage, failing to abide by Islamic dress code or suspected of having contacts with men outside the family.

Through the dark veil of Afghanistan’s village punishments, we glimpse just occasionally the terror of teenage executions. When Siddiqa, who was only 19, and her 25-year-old fiancé Khayyam were brought before a Taliban-approved religious court in Kunduz province this month, their last words were: “We love each other, no matter what happens.” In the bazaar at Mulla Quli, a crowd – including members of both families – stoned to death first Siddiqa, then Khayyam.

A week earlier, a woman identified as Bibi Sanubar, a pregnant widow, was lashed a hundred times and then shot in the head by a Taliban commander. In April of last year, Taliban gunmen executed by firing squad a man and a girl in Nimruz for eloping when the young woman was already engaged to someone else. History may never disclose how many hundreds of women – and men – have suffered a similar fates at the hands of deeply traditional village families or the Taliban.

But the contagion of “honour” crimes has spread across the globe, including acid attacks on women in Bangladesh for refusing marriages. In one of the most terrible Hindu “honour” killings in India this year, an engaged couple, Yogesh Kumar and Asha Saini, were murdered by the 19-year-old bride-to-be’s family because her fiancée was of lower caste. They were apparently tied up and electrocuted to death.

A similar fate awaited 18-year-old Vishal Sharma, a Hindu Brahmin, who wanted to marry Sonu Singh, a 17-year-old Jat – an “inferior” caste which is usually Muslim. The couple were hanged and their bodies burned in Uttar Pradesh. Three years earlier, a New Delhi court had sentenced to death

five men for killing another couple who were of the same sub-caste, which in the eyes of the local “caste council” made them brother and sister.

In Chechnya, Russia’s chosen President, Ramzan Kadyrov, has been positively encouraging men to kill for “honour”. When seven murdered women were found in Grozny, shot in the head and chest, Kadyrov announced – without any proof, but with obvious approval – that they had been killed for living “an immoral life”. Commenting on a report that a Chechen girl had called the police to complain of her abusive father, he suggested the man should be able to murder his daughter. “... if he doesn’t kill her, what kind of man is he? He brings shame on himself!”

And so to the “West”, as we like to call it, where immigrant families have sometimes brought amid their baggage the cruel traditions of their home villages: an Azeri immigrant charged in St Petersburg for hiring hitmen to kill his daughter because she “flouted national tradition” by wearing a miniskirt; near the Belgian city of Charleroi, Sadia Sheikh shot dead by her brother, Moussafa, because she refused to marry a Pakistani man chosen by her family; in the suburbs of Toronto, Kamikar Kaur Dhillon slashes his Punjabi daughter-in-law, Amandeep, across the throat because she wants to leave her arranged marriage, perhaps for another man. He told Canadian police that her separation would “disgrace the family name”.

And, of course, we should perhaps end this catalogue of crime in Britain, where only in the past few years have we ourselves woken to the reality of “honour” crimes; of Surjit Athwal, a Punjabi Sikh woman murdered on the orders of her London-based mother-in-law for trying to escape a violent marriage; of 15-year-old Tulay Goren, a Turkish Kurd from north London, tortured and murdered by her Shia Muslim father because she wished to marry a Sunni Muslim man; of Heshu Yones, 16, stabbed to death by her father in 2005 for going out with a Christian boy; of Caneze Riaz, burned alive by her husband in Accrington, along with their four children – the youngest 10 years old – because of their “Western ways”. Mohamed Riaz was a Muslim Pakistani from the North-West Frontier Province. He died of burns two days after the murders.

Scotland Yard long ago admitted it would have to review over a hundred deaths, some going back more than a decade, which now appear to have been “honour” killings.

These are just a few of the murders, a few names, a small selection of horror stories across the world to prove the pervasive, spreading infection of what must be recognised as a mass crime, a tradition of family savagery that brooks no merciful intervention, no state law, rarely any remorse.

Surjit Athwal

Murdered in 1998 by her in-laws on a trip to the Indian Punjab for daring to seek a divorce from an unhappy marriage

Du’a Khalil Aswad

Aged 17, she was stoned to death in Nineveh, Iraq, by a mob of 2,000 men for falling in love with a man outside her tribe

Rand Abdel-Qader

The Iraqi 17-year-old was stabbed to death by her father two years ago after falling in love with a British soldier in Basra

Fakhra Khar

In 2001 in Karachi, her husband poured acid on her face, after she left him and returned to her mother’s home in the red-light district of the city

Mukhtaran Bibi

The 18-year-old was gang-raped by four men in a hut in the Punjab in 2002, while up to 100 men laughed and cheered outside

Heshu Yones

The 16-year-old was stabbed to death by her Muslim father Abdullah, in west London in 2002, because he disapproved of her Christian boyfriend

Tasleem Solangi

The Pakistani village girl, 17, was falsely accused of immorality and had dogs set on her as a punishment before she was shot dead by in-laws

Shawbo Ali Rauf

Aged 19, she was taken by her family to a picnic in Dokan, Iraq, and shot seven times after they had found an unfamiliar number on her phone

Tulay Goren

The 15-year-old Kurdish girl was killed in north London by her father because the family objected to her choice of husband

Banaz Mahmud Babakir Agha

The 20-year-old's father and uncle murdered her in 2007, after she fell in love with a man her family did not want her to marry

Ayesha Baloch

Accused of having sexual relations with another man before she married, her husband slit her lip and nostril with a knife in Pakistan in 2006

P.S.

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