

The use and abuse of honour based violence in the UK

Wednesday 13 June 2012, by [PATEL Pragna](#) (Date first published: 2012).

The lack of accuracy in understanding honour based abuse in the UK has critical implications, not only for social policy and strategies developed to protect women, but also in fostering equality and anti-racism.

'Honour killings' in the UK are back in the spot light with the high profile case of Shafiea Ahmed, whose decomposed body was found in a suitcase in Cumbria in 2003. Her parents were eventually charged with her murder in 2010, and their trial [\[1\]](#) is currently taking place at Chester Crown Court where they continue to deny having had any part in her death.

No one following the testimony of Shafiea's sister, Alesha Ahmed, can fail to find her description of the events to be harrowing and troubling. On Alesha's account, her parents killed her sister by suffocating her, and, prior to killing her, they controlled and abused Shafiea on a daily basis. Why? Because, according to Alesha, she chose to adopt a 'western' lifestyle - she wore short sleeve T-shirts and trousers on occasion - and she refused an arranged marriage which they tried to force upon her whilst on a trip in Pakistan in 2003.

The hypocrisy and double standards of South Asian family values are laid bare in yet another tragic example of how the powerful twin concepts of 'honour' and 'shame', invoked to shore up patriarchal power and to police female sexuality, take precedence over the life of a daughter. Perhaps the most chilling illustration of this is the endorsement of the murder by Shafiea's brother who, immediately following the killing, and whilst only 13 years old, is alleged to have said 'she deserved it'.

If and when Shafiea's parents are found guilty, they will deserve the most severe punishment. So called 'honour killings' are indefensible wherever they occur. As we at Southall Black Sisters have proclaimed in our campaign slogans: 'There is no honour in such violence, only shame.' [\[2\]](#)

At the conclusion of the trial, media attention is once again likely to focus on the apparent increase in honour related crimes in the UK. In the last decade or so, 'honour based violence' has received considerable state and media attention, both here and across Europe. But despite often intense debate and discussion - it has become the defining issue in respect of migrant women - there is no clear picture of the extent of the problem. Everywhere, it is said that the problem is widespread, that it is rising, and that what we know is only the tip of the problem.

The Metropolitan Police state [\[3\]](#) that there are approximately 12 cases of honour killings a year. Statistics obtained by the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation (IKWRO) under the Freedom of Information Act [\[4\]](#) show that a total of 2823 incidents - including threats, abduction, acid attacks, beatings, forced marriage, mutilation and murder - were reported to the 39 police forces (out of 52 in the country) that responded. IKWRO estimates that a further 500 incidents may have been reported to the 13 forces who did not respond. Moreover, in the 12 police force areas for which comparable data was available [\[5\]](#), reports detailing numbers of crimes planned and carried

out by families or communities went up by 57% in just a year. However, a note of caution: no information is forthcoming as to how these statistics have been collated, so their accuracy is not certain.

Our own casework experience at SBS suggests that that many cases of violence against women in South Asian communities are being collapsed into honour crimes, mainly because the term honour based violence is misunderstood and misapplied. Such mis-application is particularly prevalent in media reports which are sloppy at best and disingenuous at worse. For example, a recent BBC Panorama programme on so called honour based violence lumped together cases of domestic violence (the majority) with honour killings (a very small minority), despite being told otherwise by Southall Black Sisters [6]. It would appear that its sole aim was to titillate rather than contribute to any meaningful discussion of the issues involved. It would not surprise us, then, if almost every case of domestic violence/murder involving Asian women is now classified by the police and other agencies as an honour crime or killing. But why does it matter?

The lack of accurate information is extremely worrying because it informs regressive policy approaches to migrant communities as a whole. Despite the seriousness of the issue, it is easy to tie the matter to social policies and practices that construct entire migrant communities as problematic. Unfortunately, honour based violence and the related issues of forced marriage have become symbolic of all that is deemed to be wrong with minorities. And they are linked to dubious state responses in the UK and across Europe which reject the more positive aspects of multiculturalism in favour of integration and which advocate strict and increasingly draconian immigration controls.

Women who attend our centre at SBS have had to challenge - on a daily basis - violent, abusive and degrading practices towards women which can include FGM, forced marriage, honour killings, polygamy, and many others. They have had to break harmful practices upheld by 'tradition,' claims of religious authority or cultural authenticity. Their experiences show us that culture and religion - the two are indistinguishable in reality - are employed to impose and justify control over women's bodies, sexuality, emotions, decisions and actions, preventing them from expressing their own free will and from enjoying their fundamental freedoms and human rights, including their right to choice in marriage and sexuality.

'Because of izzat (honour), I was not allowed to live in Pakistan. I was told to get married. Because of izzat, I was told to sacrifice myself for the sake of the family. What am I, a sacrificial goat? They told me it was my religious duty.'

These experiences have compelled us to make demands of the state for adequate protection, to be more responsive rather than dismissive of reports of violence and abuse, and to punish violations of women's rights to life and to be free from torture or terror. Their experience of violence is in fact part of a continuum of violence against women [7], but it is increasingly perceived as a cultural practice in debates where we are witness to an extraordinary loose use of the term 'honour based violence'. If we are to take the matter seriously, it is vital to unpack the term to reveal the underlying patriarchal dynamics of control and patterns of gender inequality. One important part of this exercise is the need to differentiate between the two main contexts in which the honour motif arises:

First, in a very small number of cases, honour operates as the primary motivating factor for violence or murder. These cases can properly be termed 'honour' crimes since the emphasis is on a purported restoration of honour through violence or threats and intimidation. The elimination of the offending woman or young girl, or in some cases young men, is the only way that a family/community feels it can restore its honour. A classic example is the case of Heshu Younis [8]. In these cases, the restoration or reclamation of honour is taken to its logical conclusion - murder.

Secondly, in the vast majority of domestic violence cases in South Asian communities, the honour principle operates as a silencing factor. Here the violence or abuse is not motivated by the need to maintain honour, but honour is invoked to silence women in the face of such violence and abuse. Such cases should not be termed 'honour crimes'. Many women frequently invoke honour to explain why they cannot leave a violent or abusive relationship. They talk of how they are expected to internalise violence and abuse, even if this involves committing suicide which is considered to be more acceptable than leaving a family or community. One high profile example of this is the case of Kiranjit Ahluwalia, a battered woman who killed her husband after 10 years of being subjected to violence and abuse, and who was released after a major campaign by SBS. She referred to the code of honour which kept her in bondage and violence for 10 years.

"My culture is like my blood – coursing through every vein in my body. It is the culture into which I was born and where I grew up, which sees the woman as the honour of the house. In order to uphold this false honour and glory she is taught to endure many kinds of oppression and pain in silence. In addition, religion also teaches her that her husband is her god and fulfilling his every desire is her religious duty. A woman who does not follow this path in our society has no respect or place in it. She suffers from all kinds of slanders against her character, and she has to face much hurt entirely alone. She is responsible not only for her husband's happiness but also his entire family's happiness"

Unless we locate honour based violence within a continuum of violence against women – and thereby within a human rights framework – it will continue to be seen purely as a phenomenon that is symptomatic of malfunctioning cultures rather than as a violation of women's human rights. To perceive honour based violence as a 'harmful cultural practice' is to de-link it from debates on violence against women and the human rights framework, and this can lead to the 'other-ing' of gender based violence. In practice this translates into culturally relativist approaches on the one hand, and on the other to racist constructions of minorities in which the notion of culture and its link to violence against women is attributed only to minorities. For example, the recent cases of Quila and Bibi [9] show the trend towards making explicit links between honour based violence, including forced marriage and family migration policies, with the aim of selectively controlling the flow of certain 'cultural' communities into the UK. The state and media portrayal of these issues as 'widespread social evils' has helped to create a moral panic and a context that is conducive to the enactment of profoundly racist, anti-immigration policies.

The paradoxical situation that we find ourselves in is that the police are still regularly failing to intervene or respond adequately to cases of 'routine' domestic violence but are more likely to respond if we label the same cases as 'honour crimes'! A decade or so ago, failure of state intervention in cases of violence against women in minority communities was a major issue, but - apart from some notable exceptions - the situation has improved, largely due to the success of campaigns by South Asian feminists. We have moved away from the worst excesses of multiculturalism where culture and religion had become a convenient excuse for non-intervention and the right to cultural and religious self-determination overshadowed the most important issue: women suffering abuse and the state's complicity in that regard.

However, we are left with the problem that many routine experiences of domestic violence within Asian communities continue to remain unheeded, as the cases of Shireen Khan and Nosheen Amjad show (see notes below). This failure, it has to be said, seems evident in all communities and there are signs that suggest we may be moving backwards.

The lack of accuracy in understanding honour based abuse has critical implications, not only for social policy and strategies developed to protect women, but also in fostering equality and anti-racism. We are now in the position of defending gains that have been made on both fronts. We have to contend with a social policy towards minorities that has shifted from multiculturalism to 'multi-

faithism', and at the same time we see the dismantling of the welfare state and cut backs on public spending which impact disproportionately on BME women's projects and refuges. In the event, despite the noise about honour based violence, there are fewer and fewer options for escape and protection.

Ironically, the current promotion of faith based projects in all areas of civil society will compromise the gender equality agenda for black and minority women in particular. It will divert women away from the legal justice system into the hands of religious conservative and fundamentalists leaders – leaders who are also in the business of lambasting 'malfunctioning cultures' but with one important difference: they are seeking to harness religion to power in order to impose 'authentic religious values'. The cry of religious discrimination can and will be used to claim access to and control over resources, whilst at the same time it will serve to perpetuate discrimination against women and other sub groups, and to deter state intervention in family matters.

Religion is increasingly becoming the main marker of identity, especially in relation to South Asian communities, and yet religion is implicated in violence along a range of dimensions including violence against women. There is evidence to show how the rise of religious fundamentalism or authoritarianism is affecting the prevalence of violence against women, children and sexual minorities in countries across the world – see, for example, the experiences of women in Iran, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, India and Palestine. A number of well-publicised cases across all denominations have illustrated the failure of religious institutions and faith-based organisations to hold abusers to account or to condemn gender based violence, whether justified by religion or culture. Debates on honour based violence following the Shafiea Ahmed case will therefore have to be alert to ways in which both the state and religious groups seek to instrumentalise women's bodies with very real human rights ramifications for black and minority women in the UK.

Pragna Patel

Shireen Khan and Nosheen Amjad

Shireen Khan died after having been strangled to death by her husband in front of their young son at their home in Southall, in October 2008. A week before her death, Shireen had obtained a protection (non-molestation) order with a power of arrest attached. The night before her death, Shireen called the police because he had assaulted her and therefore broken the terms of the order. Instead of arresting him, the police left after him a warning only. Immediately after the police left, Ms S' husband killed her.

Nosheen Amjad is a young, Pakistani woman who found set alight in the garden of her matrimonial home following a troubled marriage in which she experienced domestic violence. As a result of the tragic incident, she suffered extensive burns and was in intensive care in hospital but she was recovering. However, immediately following a visit from her husband and in-laws, she suffered a catastrophic brain injury. She is currently severely disabled and dependent on 24 hour care at a nursing home. She has minimal response to her environment, has no voluntary movement and is cortically blind. Her condition is life long. The police investigations into how she sustained her injuries in 2006 were stalled after her brain injury. There has been no state inquiry into the fire incident or into the 'accident' in hospital. SBS is currently assisting Nosheen's father obtain justice.

P.S.

* This article is based on a talk given by the author at the Doughty Street seminar organised by Discrimination Law Association earlier this year. From Open Democracy:
<http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/pragna-patel/use-and-abuse-of-honour-based-violence-in-uk>

Reproduced also on Viewpoint Online, issue 104, June 8, 2012:
<http://www.viewpointonline.net/honour-based-violence-in-the-uk-pragna-patel.html>

* Pragna Patel is a founding member of Southall Black Sisters (<http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/>) and Women Against Fundamentalism (<http://www.womenagainstofundamentalism.org.uk/>). She has published extensively on race, gender and religion, and has been centrally involved in cases and campaigns around domestic violence, immigration and religious fundamentalism

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/may/30/shafiea-ahmed-sister-denies-lying-implicate-parents-murder?newsfeed=true>

[2] <http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/campaigns/>

[3] http://news.bbc.co.uk/panorama/hi/front_page/newsid_9706000/9706514.stm

[4] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/freedomofinformation>

[5] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/police>

[6] <http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk/>

[7] <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/48/a48r104.htm>

[8] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/london/3149030.stm

[9] http://www.supremecourt.gov.uk/decided-cases/docs/UKSC_2011_0022_PressSummary.pdf