

Yemen: Honor crimes - injustice for women

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While Yemen struggles to prove it is fertile ground for freedom and democracy, its efforts are often thwarted by ingrained traditions at odds with those concepts. (Yemen Observer)

One of the more horrific cultural practices — and one proving difficult to eradicate — is the murder of women by their family members who suspect them of adultery.

Such murders are called “honor killings,” as women are killed to preserve the honor of her family. Such murders have been committed in Yemen and other parts of the Middle East for hundreds of years. And they still occur today. More than 400 women were killed for reasons of “honor” in 1997, found a survey by the women’s studies department of Sana’a University. This is the only year for which estimates of the number of honor killings exist.

Only one other study of honor killings has been done, and it put forth no estimates on how many women are murdered each year. There is no official tally of the number of women who have died as a result of honor killings in Yemen, as most are committed without the knowledge of the government. Police officials in Sana’a say that such actions are rarely reported. United Nations Children’s Fund defines honor crimes as an ancient practice in which men kill female relatives in the name of family honor, for having any kind of sexual activity outside marriage, even when they have been victims of rape.

Locals believe that it would be almost impossible for such cases to be reported to the law. First, usually the female victim is killed by her own family members—the people closest to her. And the killers are not likely to report themselves. Also, outsiders do not interfere with other people’s family issues, which they see as being solved from within. Khalid al-Anesi, a prominent lawyer for human rights cases and executive director for HOOD organization, the largest human rights organization in Yemen, claims that if cases were reported to the police, they would not do anything to help, because they have the same mentality, and believe that the family is doing the right thing to preserve its pride.

“In most cases locals would never report honor killings to police, because they believe that police forces feel the same way, and would resort to the same solution if it happened to their families,” said al-Anesi. “Usually when something happens to a victim, the family is the one who tries to bring the suspect to trial. In this situation, the family are the suspects and no one will ever bring the case up,” added al-Anesi. In 2005, The Arab Sisters Forum for Human Rights (ASF) conducted a study on honor crimes. They found that most honor crimes against women were committed merely because of suspicion of the women’s sexual behavior. Any woman who draws suspicion, even if she is virtuous, could be at risk.

The study also disclosed that honor crimes are committed at all levels of society, said Nabil al-Mohamedi, a lawyer who participated in a public discussion on honor killings. He said that Yemeni law states that a man must be surprised and observed by four witnesses in the act of committing adultery with a woman, before accusations against the woman can be considered valid. Without four

witnesses, a woman cannot be put to death. If relatives simply have suspicions about it happening, a woman should not be punished.

“The relative must be in the act of committing adultery and not be, for example, only in a shameful position or naked,” al-Mohamedi, said. According to the study, some girls are victims of honor crimes not because they practice deeds in conflict with laws or with Sharia, but because they refuse to yield to their families’ marriage decision. From the legal point of view, Article 232 of the Penal Code of Yemen states that “if a man kills his wife or her alleged lover in the act of committing adultery, or attacking them, causing disability, he may be fined or sentenced to imprisonment for a term not exceeding one year.”

Unfairly, women are the only ones singled out for punishment for sexual crimes, while the men, even rapists, may be treated with impunity. Most of honor crime victims are women and most of honor crime perpetrators are men. “Everything shameful in Yemen has to deal with women. Men act as if they are forgiven by god, and have prior permission to follow their desires, even though some might be unlawful,” said Abeer Nasser, a university student who feels her own parents pay too much attention to her behavior, while her brothers are left free from their supervision.

It is estimated by the United Nations Population Fund that as many as 5,000 women and girls are murdered by family members each year in so-called “honor killings” around the world. Yet if not for the crimes committed by men, many of these women would yet be alive.

P.S.

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