

Honour Killings

“The clan saves the Arab from the desert and enslaves him as well.”

(Rafik Schami: „Die dunkle Seite der Liebe“)

According to UN reports, violence toward women is the most common cause of death for women 15 to 44 years old. One form of violence toward women is known as “honour killings”.

Honour killings are a pre-Islamic practice, that cannot be founded by Islamic theology. They are a characteristic of archaic, tribally organized societies, especially those found in the Middle East. Indeed in Islamic influenced societies, traditional views of what is honourable have a close relationship with societally accepted religious values as the Koran and the tradition hold numerous regulations for the demure behaviour of women. The honour killings are not only practiced in an Islamic environment, although a considerable concentration of honour killings may be observed in Islamic societies. The number stands out in Pakistan especially.

What is an Honour Killing?

Honour killing is a form of violence, that is almost without exception directed towards women. It is a murder which is an intentional, often especially malicious act with few causes, that is, however, judged by family and society as a legitimate killing of a girl or a woman by a family member, when she is suspect of breaking the family honour code. The tarnishing of the family honour occurs though an extra-marital or premarital relationship, through the suspicion of adultery or a premarital relationship, or also through the general moral misbehavior of a woman. In general, the perpetrator can expect a mild punishment or that his act will remain completely unatoned. The punishment is for example in Jordan, officially approximately seven months long. This is astonishing as Jordan had signed the UN Women’s Rights Agreement (CEDAW convention) (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women).

But violence because of religious reasons are excluded from that. That means:

The CEDAW Convention was passed by the General Assembly of the UN on 18th December 1978. Its focus is on the elimination of any discrimination against women in all areas of life. Because Jordan has signed this convention the situation of women should improve in Jordan and women should have more rights in this country. But at the same time Jordan acknowledges this convention only partially: If someone kills another person because of “honour”, he will be sentenced by Jordan law. But article 97 and 98 demand at the same time that an offender who killed another person in an outburst of wrath can count on a mild judgement. The same if a husband kills his wife because of suspected infidelity. With this, the uncompromising condemnation of honour killings is partially revoked.

Consequently, as a rule, where they are tribal practice neither the society nor the courts consider honour killings as a criminal act. Here honour killings are widely accepted by society and are legitimate or even necessary means for the defense of the family honour.

Means of Death

Honour killings happen intentionally because as a rule the death of the girl or the woman is decided in a sort of family court, but the victim is not told the verdict. The act is most often done by a male relative, maybe even a brother, brother-in-law or father. Often a minor will be chosen as the perpetrator so that in case of legislative consequences, the punishment will be lessened.

Honour killings occur especially in the Middle East, for example in Jordan, Palestine, Turkey, and Iran, and also in South and Central Asia as well as in Brazil (SURGIR: „Was ist ein Ehrenmord?“ www.surgir.ch). Very often an honour killing is concealed; in Palestine for example, the reason for punishment may be “collaboration with Israel” or in Pakistan, an accident with an electric appliance. Other victims die through being poisoned, shot, stabbed, or strangled. Other offers are doused with petrol and burned (Souad: Bei lebendigem Leib. 2003).

Honour and Shame

The honour code plays a large role in patriarchal influenced societies. The “honour and shame” culture is widely spoken of in anthropology. The highest goal is to avoid losing face and to uphold the family honour. Ones’ reputation must be bettered and every form of humiliation must be avoided. Even in the ongoing conflicts between Western countries and the Middle Eastern World, honour is an issue as the Middle Eastern World thinks it must hold up her honour next to the Western World. A “complex” in the Arab world toward the west has been suggested as an attempt to explain the honour perception of the Middle East: Because the Arab world is behind the West in business and science spheres, the West is trying to rule over the Arab World and to steal her honour.

The honour code of this society consists of a defensive and an offensive form of upholding honour. The defensive form is referred to as “ird” in Arabic. It stands for the sexual purity and faithfulness of a woman. As the honour of the family is largely based upon the bodily purity of the women of the family, the honour can only be made clean through a loss of blood from the suspected guilty party. The offensive form of the honour code is defined through the Arabic word “sharaf” and means the numerous acts and behaviors through which a good reputation is increased. These include generosity, courage and respectful behavior to others.

Sexuality and Femininity in Islamic Societies

Expectations of sexuality and femininity in Islamic societies play an important role as well as the concept of honour and shame in attempting to explain what the triggering factors for honour killings are:

- In an Islamic society, sexuality is centered on the man and is determined hierarchically. The man is the rightful claimant in regard to the practice of his sexuality, while the woman is required to be sexually obedient in a marriage. The idea of an equal partnership without the concept of obedience is foreign to Islamic marriage laws and traditional Islamic society.
- The marriage and family law is an essential part of the Sharia. Due to this, the arrangement of sexuality in marriage has a Sharia law aspect.
- According to the majority opinion in Islam, the female body has a passive and, at the same time, a serving function. Sure 2:223 says :”Your women are a tilth for you, so go to your tilth as you will and send (good deeds) before you for your souls, and fear Allah, and know that you will (one day) meet him. Give glad tidings to believers (o, Muhammad).” The traditional Muslim theology that comes from this verse says that marital sexuality is the broad, unrestrained right of the husband. The wife is subject to constant social control through religious laws and society.
- The woman’s body and her sexuality are a sign of the worth of the whole community. For this reason a high societal pressure weighs upon a woman to behave according to the generally recognized rules of decency. The Koran instructs on a woman’s shameful behaviour: “And tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment only which that is apparent, and draw their veils over their bosoms, and not

to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers or husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons or their brothers or their brothers' sons or sisters' sons, or their women or their slaves, or male attendants who lack vigour, or children who know not of women's nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet as to reveal what they hide of their adornment. And turn to Allah alltogether, o believers, in order that you may succeed" (24:31).

- The husband dominates the woman and is set above her in this societal concept. The woman must submit her sexual wishes to the communal regulations. Even the Koran orders the man above the woman and even gives him the right to beat her: "Men are in charge of women, because Allah has made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Allah is ever High Exalted, Great" (4:34). Here culture and religion are allied. The traditional Near and Middle Eastern cultures prescribe the interpretation of this Koran verse and strongly limit the freedom of women. Modern interpretations which argue the equal position of a woman by using the Koran, have little weight.

Causes for Honour Killings

An honour killing can be triggered by many differing situations. A woman can become a victim through her behavior or through her understanding of her role which differs from the norm. She differs from the norm, for example, when she does not agree to an arranged marriage that the family has arranged for her. Or when she is not satisfied with her role as housewife and mother and goes out and speaks with men to whom she is not related. In a conservative environment she then could already be suspect of being unmoral or even of being an adulteress.

It is expected from a woman that she follows the decisions of the family, especially those from her father, but not that she realizes her own ideas. That is why another cause for honour killings could be a woman's wish for a self determined life with the goal of leaving home for a school or career education. A woman's independent decisions irritate the traditional thinking man; such decisions do not belong to a woman. From the position of the society, the social order is being put into question. There are also cases, in which women reject specific religious or tribal traditions. Or a Muslim woman would like to marry a Christian, which is forbidden in Islamic marital laws.

Being seen together with a man or merely the suspicion of speaking to a man or being together brings the suspicion of sexual impurity. Metaphorically seen, the woman's body is the vase of the family's honour. If it is damaged, the honour of the whole family is broken.

Here a disallowed relationship, in other words, a non-societal conforming behavior meets the "imperative need" to correct the woman's behavior. If the woman is not willing to react to exhortations and smaller punishments (for example, beatings) and to bow to social pressure, the man feels that he is, from his perspective, forced to provide for righteousness.

Especially tragic is when in some cases a rumor is enough to cause an honour killing. The insinuation of a sexual relationship or a flirt is in many cases enough to be seen as a non-acceptable insult to the family honour in a society in which honour killings are practiced. Blood must be shed to regain honour. Here honour and truth have nothing to do with another. The whole drama becomes clear in that because of Jordanien autopsies it is estimated that by 80% of the suspects, no disallowed sexual relationship existed. Also signs and hints or dreams which have nothing to do with honour killings are sometimes to be taken as "proofs" for the supposed infidelity of a man's wife.

Under these circumstances a woman has only the right to life if she subdues to the norms and traditions of her society. The Pakistani lawyer Hian Jilani is together with her sister Asma Jahagir working as a lawyer and supporting women seeking a divorce. She has also founded a house for women to protect them from domestic violence, but has to face a lot of resistance. One of her clients was shot by members of her family in Hian Jilani's presence.

The perpetrator of honour killings lives in a society that does not consider him a normal criminal. He is considered as one who was ready to put righteousness and order back in place. That is why some common crimes against women are concealed as honour killings.

Distinguishing Signs of Honour Killings

Every honour killing violently ends a God-given life at a much too early point in time. There are different triggers that lead to each honour killing but there are, however, some common signs:

- The family "court" decides to kill the girl or the woman.
- As a rule, the perpetrator is a relative. Minors are preferred so that a lesser punishment may be expected.
- The honour killing is not judged as a criminal act by the society but the perpetrator is looked upon as a hero.
- Before the honour killing happens, abuse is often used to bring a girl or a woman "to their senses".
- The victim cannot count upon help or solidarity from the society. First when the blood of the presumed guilty party has been shed, is the act reconciled and the family's honour washed clean. No one from outside would interfere in such a family matter.
- The husband's honour would be tainted due to the existing honour code in his sphere. The woman is the guilty party – even when she is raped – the perpetrator only sets righteousness and order in place. Due to this, "The question of honour has nothing to do with the truth" (Amnesty International, quoted from "Le Monde").
- The act can be disguised to others as an accident or as a punishment for another supposed happening.
- The murder would be justified in that it was the only possibility to save the honour of the family or that it was upholding the religious commandments. In this way, honour killings win societal acceptance.

Perspectives

Which societal changes must take place so that the honour killings can come to an end or are, in other words, no longer accepted by the society but are judged as criminal acts? Jaqueline Thibault, a worker from the women's relief organisation "Surgir" says: "First the husband must change. He must stop beating the wives and his daughters. When the husband changes, then the society can change as well" (www.qantara.de/show_article.php/_c-469/_nr-110/-p-1/i.html?). The societal values must change as well: the woman must see her equality as her right and not as a western import. The society as a whole must think newly about their traditionally, culturally, and religiously derived values. The difficulty in ending honour killings is even more intensified through the non-state-law, partially feudal-similar structures in some Middle Eastern countries. Neither individualism nor universal human rights are the focus of the society. Violence toward women is a theme that is often taboo in public discussion. All this leads to little change in honour killings.

Pakistan

The tradition of the honour killing is deeply rooted, especially in Pakistan. The Islamic Republic of Pakistan was called in to life in 1947 by the lawyer and politician Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Pakistan means “land of the pure”. In 1948, the first president, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, said that Pakistan will not become a theocracy and that all Pakistanis – may it be Muslims, Hindus or Christians, which have the same rights and privileges. In the 70s and 80s, the Islamic powers were able to achieve more goals. This is shown, among others, through the “Blasphemy law”. It was enforced in 1986. Everyone can be punished who belittles Muhammad or insults Islam. The “Blasphemy law” could be enforced because the penal code of Pakistan is based on the religious law of Sharia. The political and societal structures in Pakistan make it easy for the societal toleration of violent acts toward women. Pakistani women as well as refuge women from Afghanistan are impacted by this violence. Some human rights organizations say that about 80% of women living in rural areas live under domestic violence; others claim that about 40% of the Pakistani women accept violence within their families as part of their female destiny (Qantara.de). Many of these women are illiterate and have neither the knowledge nor the means to defend themselves against the abuse. The honour killings in Pakistan have their source in the tribal traditions of the Belutishtan, Punjab and Sindh. The term for honour killings is “Karo Kari” (adulterer/adulteress). The number of unreported cases of honour killings is probably quite high.

Honour Killings – What Now?

Honour killings are a phenomenon that is essentially limited to traditional Islamic patriarchal social systems. The honour killings are triggered by the man’s subjective perception or of the society, in other words, when a woman steps over boundaries which questions or hurts the husband’s honour. The man is now required to act to restore his honour.

The foundational question arises, what kind of honour is it that is founded upon a wife or is restored through her death? What kind of honour is it that gives the right to end a life, to forbid freedom or to separate loved ones? What kind of honour is it that favours torture and abuse and snuffs out every form of individual decision making or forbids the talents and skills of half of the society?

Honour killings are a phenomenon that affects the whole society, not only in the Middle East, but already in Europe. In Germany, in Berlin alone, 6 women died due to honour killings in the last six months of 2004. Until now this topic has seldom been discussed in public. It is time to no longer look away complacently, but to support the girls and women who are threatened by this danger as well as to exhaust all legal resources to stop honour killings and to punish them severely.

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