

'HONOR' KILLING: HOW THE TOXIC PERCEPTION OF PRESTIGE IS KILLING THOUSANDS OF WOMEN EACH YEAR



Source : Reuters.

In November 2020, [the United Arab Emirates decided to put an end to the justification of honor killings within its courts](#) as a part of a larger legal overhaul that, alongside the loosening of alcohol and sexual relations restrictions, attempts to leave behind the world's perception of it being an oppressive and patriarchal country, and yet to attract foreign investment and tourism. This step towards protecting fundamental freedoms, although welcomed for its necessity, comes late, and driven by mere economic purposes. That is to mean that, not being followed by a deep and big ideological revolution, the legal framework will not be able to end with such enrooted cultural behaviours alone.

But what are the so-called honor killings? And why can a women's murder be considered culture?

Honor killing stands for the murder of a woman, usually committed by her relatives, who is said to have allegedly acted in a way that dishonored or disprestiged her family. These dishonorable conducts

encompass all kinds of 'sexual actions' -from talking to men before being married, or who are not your husband, to seeking divorce even if your partner abuses you-, as well as actions that contradict the family's patterns, such as behaving independently or expressing disagreement. All these conducts are regarded as impure, and as factors that could make the family's honor and respect diminish exponentially. Therefore, killing the women, the 'indecent bearer', is a way of restoring their social status.

It is inconceivable that these crimes, which are flagrant human rights abuses, are still happening today in high numbers, and in places in which illegality was supposed to be established years backwards. That makes one wonder of the efficiency of that legal positionings.

Even if honor killings are banned in almost every country, some legislations can offer loopholes for the responsible of the murder -mostly Gulf countries and those who base some of their legal procedures in

Sharia law-, meaning that in spite of being illegal, the responsible can be freed without being held accountable if the family of the victim approves so. Furthermore, in countries in which that loophole does not exist as such, judges and attorneys seldom put the blame only in the assassin. More often than not, we find that the victim is judged and doubted for her behaviour rather than the actual accused. Sometimes, they drop the charges because the victim, acting as she did, actually deserved it, she was looking for it, they would say.

A huge misconception is that honor killings only take place in southern countries in which, as we said, rules are not so strict. However, honor killings are a global phenomenon. According to [a 2008 report from the United Nations Population Fund](#), over 5000 women a year die from honor killings around the globe, and that number is expected to have grown in the last years. Besides, cases are also found in [the US as well as in European and other Western countries](#), which means that it is not enough for governments to impose legal punishments if there is not a deep societal transformation too.

In this line, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy, member of the Forum's Young Global Leaders community and winner of an Oscar for a film exposing honor killings, expressed in a [World Economic Forum](#) report that "from its origins to its execution, 'honor' killing is entirely community sanctioned. It is difficult to change a mindset in a society where people feel it is acceptable to punish a woman for transgressions against perceived codes of honor, even if it results in the death of a person."

The concept of dishonor and impurity are the clearest symbols of the patriarchal and misogynist social structure we need to get rid of in order to ensure a safe and decent life for all women. According to a report from the Lancet, the crimes supporting them can be linked to demographic factors such as poverty and low social status. It points out that, [in Iran, the provinces with the highest rates of honor killings also have the highest rates of unemployment and poverty](#), clearly stating a firm relationship between violence culture and the current socioeconomic framework based on inequality.

Therefore, socioeconomic policies as well as the promotion of equality through education, are indispensable requirements for the legal actions to work. They alone will not bring change, and the fact

that some countries are not willing to take more steps in the matter exposes their lack of commitment in the fight for women's rights, and their desire to maintain a political order based on hierarchy. "Policing the behaviour of girls and young women is central to the maintenance of order and hierarchy within these extremely patriarchal communities, and those families that are seen to be failing in this duty face extraordinary pressures. They can be excluded, even harassed, until they take some kind of step to restore their honor" affirmed Deeyah Khan, for the same World Economic Forum report, who also made a documentary on the issue. His contribution makes us realise that far from being familiar issues, these are deep and structural, and yet need a broader approach.

It is important to emphasise that, while the majority of honor killings take place in countries where Islam is the main religion, the crime itself might not be found in religious scriptures. Writer and professor Phyllis Chesler [considers the crime to have stemmed from tribalism rather than from any particular religion](#). Moreover, she claims similar practices to be found in tribal societies in the Balkans, India and southern Mediterranean countries; showing that it is not an originally Muslim problem and calling for a non-culpabilisation of Muslim community as a whole.

It is true that such actions are easier to preserve within a theocracy, or where religious institutions constitute one of the most powerful groups in the territory, but as for the scriptures themselves, they are not the real creators of the issue.

In any case, what is true is that women oppression is a common feature in almost all cultures. That is why it is so important to bear in mind that an act of violence can never be tolerated, even if it comes from tradition. As it happens with female genital mutilation, honor crimes are often portrayed as traditional cultural practices, and detractors claim wanting to eliminate them to be an attack to their faith and way of life. The mistake in that assertion lies in thinking that murders can be considered cultural, or even honorable. In this sense, we also need to fight those who link culture to morality, and who use it to maintain a concrete power and political structure that has detrimental effects on the fulfillment of human rights.

We see that a strong action plan transcending legislation is needed to combat these horrendous crimes internationally, especially now that [they have been rising again due to the Covid-19 pandemic](#), the

Lancet analyses. We cannot neglect human rights at any moment, thus it is urgent that all members of civil society as well as institutions, treat honor killings and all abuses against women as a priority, and eventually reduce the number of victims to 0.

And to conclude, it must be said that there will never be anything honorable in killing someone who just wants to be free.

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