

EXPC 6005 – Gender and Peace Studies
FINAL ESSAY

The Intersection of Gender, Patriarchy, and Religion:
A Case Study of Honour Killings

Melissa Pichard
EXPC 6005
Professor Jacobo Schifter
December 16th, 2011

The modern world is divided into numerous continents, regions, countries, and cities, and thus, there exists a plethora of different cultures and religions. The debate over the meanings of culture and religion are highly litigious as there are many; however, for the purposes of this essay, culture is defined as “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs”,¹ and religion signifies “human beings’ relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, spiritual, or divine”.² Diverse gender constructions are inherent in each culture and religion, yet there is a pattern of gender hierarchy that negatively intersects with women’s rights, culminating in the oppression of and violence against women, as evidenced by the case of honour killings. The patriarchal foundations of numerous cultures and religions create certain perceptions of gender roles and on how a woman must conform to such constructions in order to belong or be accepted by said culture or religion. Thus we are faced with the polemic of discovering how to harmonise religion and women’s rights when they contradict each other in order to create a peaceful and multicultural society which ensures that the rights and the dignity of women are upheld.

Honour killing is a practice that has also put certain women “at personal risk from patriarchal, cultural and religious belief systems of ‘honour and shame’”.³ The term honour killing is defined as the “premeditated murder of preadolescent, adolescent, or adult women by one or more male members of the immediate or extended family”.⁴ The driving force behind honour killings is family honour; effectively, in certain cultures, violence committed against a

¹ United Nations. UNESCO. *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*.

² “Religion.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

³ Meeto, V., and H. S. Mirza. “‘There Is Nothing ‘honourable’ about Honour Killings’: Gender, Violence and the Limits of Multiculturalism.” p. 188

⁴ Sev’er, Aysan, and Gökçeçişek Yurdakul. “Culture of Honor, Culture of Change: A Feminist Analysis of Honor Killings in Rural Turkey.” pp. 964-965.

woman is justified on the condition that the woman has brought dishonour to her family.⁵ A family council consisting of the victim's male relatives decide whether a woman is guilty of dishonourable acts⁶, which can include but is not limited to, a woman who is raped by a man other than her husband, an adulterous woman, a woman who desires to leave her abusive husband, a woman failing to prove that she is a virgin on her wedding night by not bleeding, and a woman appearing in a public space with a man who is neither her husband nor her relative.⁷ Some honour killings are executed for seemingly minor infractions as well, such as a young woman's refusal to wear or improperly wearing the *hijab* and her desire to wear makeup; this rationalisation for honour killing is also known as Westernisation,⁸ which indicates that honour killings are not exclusively carried out in developing countries, but also in the developed world, also typically considered the Western world. Most reports indicate that victims of honour killings are habitually women of poorer economic status and the perpetrators of these crimes are their male relatives.⁹ The official number of reported honour killings is estimated at 5 000 to 10 000 annually¹⁰ and the United Nations' Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has further detailed the facts and figures related to honour killings in a number of Arabic nations: there are over 1 000 women killed annually in Pakistan for bringing shame and dishonour upon their families and in Egypt, 47% of the women killed in Alexandria had been killed by a male relative after having been raped.¹¹ Conversely, it is imperative to take into consideration the fact that honour killings, similarly to rape and other forms of domestic violence against women, are rarely

⁵ Johal, Anita. "Struggle Not Submission: Domestic Violence." *From Homebreakers to Jailbreakers: Southall Black Sisters*. p. 37.

⁶ Sev'er, Aysan, and Gökçeçiçek Yurdakul. "Culture of Honor, Culture of Change: A Feminist Analysis of Honor Killings in Rural Turkey." p. 965.

⁷ Odeh, Lama Abu. "Honor Killings and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies." p. 918.

⁸ Chester, Phyllis. "Worldwide Trends in Honor Killings." p. 6.

⁹ Odeh, Lama Abu. "Honor Killings and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies." p. 912.

¹⁰ Epstein, Cynthia Fuchs. "Death by Gender." p. 54.

¹¹ Cohen, Michelle Fram. "The Condition of Women in Developing and Developed Countries." p. 263.

reported, thus the numbers of women killed in the name of honour provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and governments may not reflect the true scope of the crime.¹²

In the Muslim culture, the female body is constructed as pure and virginal biologically prior to marriage and socially virginal thereafter,¹³ thus the inclusion of the word “honour” in honour killings; female behaviour must be honourable and must conform to the appropriate gender roles as constructed by society. However, this is not unique to Islam; the catechism of the Catholic Church indicates that virginity prior to marriage is a valued principle. Furthermore, “the requirement that one be a virgin on the day of one’s marriage is more rigorously enforced for women than it is for men”.¹⁴ Honour killings demonstrate the value placed upon marriage, particularly in the Middle East and many parts of Africa¹⁵, and the emphasis on the purity of a woman in order to ensure the maintenance of the tradition of marriage. Although the crime carries the word “honour”, “the crimes themselves are dishonourable: they are merely justified by the perpetrator, and wider community, in the name of honour. In this sense honour crimes are essentially a justification for male based communal and familial violence and essentially about domestic violence”.¹⁶ In certain cultures, the idea that a man must assert his authority and discipline his wife is commonplace and violence is an accepted form of inciting obedience. In fact, the shari’a, also known as religious law, which is in place in various Muslim countries, “views marriage as a reciprocal relationship in which the husband provides support in exchange

¹² Sev'er, Aysan, and Gökçeçiçek Yurdakul. “Culture of Honor, Culture of Change: A Feminist Analysis of Honor Killings in Rural Turkey.” pp. 966.

¹³ Odeh, Lama Abu. “Honor Killings and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies.” p. 919.

¹⁴ Schifter, Jacobo. “The Religious Discourse.” *The Sexual Construction of Latino Youth*. p. 66.

¹⁵ Epstein, Cynthia Fuchs. “Death by Gender.” p. 54.

¹⁶ Meeto, V., and H. S. Mirza. ““There Is Nothing 'honourable' about Honour Killings": Gender, Violence and the Limits of Multiculturalism.” p. 188.

for the wife's obedience".¹⁷ The practice of committing homicides in the name of honour has moreover been legitimised by its enshrinement in shari'a law as an excuse for murder. The Article 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code states "He who catches his wife, or one of his female un-lawfuls committing adultery with another, and he kills, wounds, or injures both of them, is excused and benefits from an exemption from penalty".¹⁸ Provisions such as Article 340 exist in many Arab countries' penal codes, including, but not limited to, Egypt's, Tunisia's, Libya's, Kuwait's, Iraq's, Syria's, Lebanon's, Algeria's, and existed in certain European Penal Codes as well, such as Spain's, Portugal's, and Italy's until 1979 and France's until 1975.¹⁹ Furthermore, the use of an honour-related discourse is advanced in international conventions, which can be used as a defence for acts such as honour killing and, furthermore, legitimises patriarchal gender constructions surrounding honour-related discourse. Article 27 of the Fourth Geneva Convention urges states to protect women in international armed conflict "against any attack on their honour, in particular against rape...".²⁰ The specific language utilised in the drafting of the Fourth Geneva Conventions "assumes that women should be protected from sexual crimes because they implicate a woman's honour, reinforcing the notion of women as men's property, rather than because they constitute violence".²¹ When the term "honour" is used in international discourses on human rights, it contributes to the legitimisation of distinctions between men and women due to honour-based gender roles and, to an extent, the defence of violence motivated by honour issues.

Homicide and violence against a person is an overt violation of one's rights, notably in terms of security; however, the gendered aspect of honour killings breaches a number of other

¹⁷ Wiesner-Hanks, Merry E. "Chapter Five: Religion." *Gender in History: Global Perspectives*. p. 127.

¹⁸ Odeh, Lama Abu. "Honor Killings and the Construction of Gender in Arab Societies." pp. 913-914.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 914-915.

²⁰ Charlesworth, Hilary. "Feminist Methods in International Law." p. 386.

²¹ Ibid, p. 386.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

