

Honour Killing: A Community Based Punishment to the Women

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Abstract

Honour killing can be defined as the homicide of the member of a family or social group by other members due to the belief of the perpetrators that the victim has brought dis-honour upon the family or community. In most of the cases, honour killings are mostly directed against the women especially in the South Asian and Middle Eastern Islamic cultures. Sadly, this culture is prevalent in some parts of the Indian society too.

Keywords: Discrimination; Patriarchy; Subordinate; Aggression; Barbarism.

Introduction

'Honour Killing' of women can be defined as acts of murder in which 'a woman is killed for her actual or perceived immoral behaviour'. Such immoral behaviour may take the form of marital infidelity, refusing to submit to an arranged marriage. The concept of women as property and honour is deeply entrenched in the social, political and economic fabric of South Asian countries, Muslim countries and India. Through 'the centuries, honour killings have become deeply rooted in cultural and social norms not just in rural and urbanizing India but around the world. Many experts believe that there are about 1,000 honour killings a year in India. It may appear relatively a small number in a country with over a billion people, but no one can really be sure if this is not just the tip of an iceberg. AUN study in 2000 suggested there were as many as 5,000 woman and girls killed each year by a family member as part of some honour crime all over the world. These incidents involved Muslim, Hindu and Christian families in South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and many other countries like Canada, the U.S. and Europe among immigrant communities.

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Definition

"An honour killing or honour killing is the homicide of a member of a family by other members, due to the perpetrators' belief that the victim has brought shame or dis-honour upon the family or has violated the principals of a religion, usually for reasons such as refusing to enter an arranged marriage, being in a relationship that is disapproved by their family, having sex outside marriage, becoming the victim of rape, dressing in ways which are deemed inappropriate, or engaging in homosexual relations."

Honour Killing in India

Honour killings are directed against women and girls. The perceived dis-honour is normally the result of one of the following behaviours, or the suspicion of such behaviours:

Youngsters in certain parts of India today cannot choose their partners. If they still do and the choice violates the norms set down by the caste, the consequences can be death. This kind of killings should be seen in a wider context. There are many gruesome murders in the name of honour in the recent months. Most victims of honour killings reported from various parts of the country are young people who choose to love or marry outside their caste, sub-caste or religion. Many caste groups, communities and families in several parts of the country still seem

violently opposed to the right of young adults to choose a life partner. Marriage is turning out to be lethal for these young couples. The agitated family members stooped to that extent where they are ready to kill their child for falling in love across boundaries of caste or religion.

Now, there are various reasons why people or family members decide to kill the daughter in the name of preserving their family honour. The most obvious reason for this practice to continue in India, albeit, at a much faster and almost daily basis, is because of the fact that the caste system continues to be at its rigid best and also because people from the rural areas refuse to change their attitude to marriage. According to them, if any daughter dares to disobey her parents on the issue of marriage and decides to marry a man of her wishes but from another gotra or outside her caste, it would bring disrepute to the family honour and hence they decide to give the ultimate sentence that is death to the daughter. Now as has become the norm, the son-in-law is killed as well.

There are various misconceptions regarding the practice of honour killing. The first misconception about honour killing is that this is a practice that is limited to the rural areas. The truth is that it is spread over such a large geographical area that we cannot isolate honour killings to rural areas only, though one has to admit that majority of the killings take place in the rural areas. But it has also been seen recently that even the metropolitan cities like Delhi and Tamil Nadu are not safe from this crime because five honour killings were reported from Delhi and in Tamil Nadu; a daughter and son in law were killed due to marriage into the same gotra. So it can be seen clearly that honour killing is not isolated to rural areas but also to urban areas and as already pointed out, it has a very wide geographical spread. The second misconception regarding honour killing is that it has religious roots. Even if a woman commits adultery, there have to be four male witnesses with good behaviour and reputation to validate the charge. Furthermore only the State can carry out judicial punishments, but never an individual vigilante. So, we can clearly see that there is no religious backing or religious roots for this heinous crime.

Causes of Honour Killings

If we look upon the causes, the notion of killing a woman basically arises from discrimination against children and women. Women have no rights to decide, once a decision is made by the family, any challenge to that decision is taken as a challenge to culture,

family and their values. Another cause responsible for killings is the dispute between girls and their parents on marriage and control, specially the marriage outside one's own caste. The notion of marrying outside one's own caste brings dis-honour to the family which is responsible for axing their daughter, to death, by her own father or brother. The basic cause of this social menace is the tradition of caste and control over a woman's body and the patriarchal mind set.

Because of this in most of the cases the honour killing is done by girls' family. The notion of the father as dictator with an iron-fisted grips on the lives of his children specially his daughters regrettably persists in many countries around the world. And, the father believes that if his children stray, especially in sexual matters, the father is entitled to punish them even unto death. This barbarism carries the name Honour Killing. If we look upon honour killing from sociological angle, when a woman marries to a person of lower caste she goes into the husband's caste, this brings the family's status down in the eyes of society. Patriarchal tradition 'casts the male as the sole protector of the female' so he must have total control of her. If this protection is violated, he loses honour because he failed to protect her or he failed to bring her up correctly.

Methods of Honour Killing

Methods of killing include stoning, stabbing, beating, burning, beheading, hanging, throat slashing, lethal acid attacks, shooting and strangulation. The murders are sometimes performed in public to warn the other women within the community of possible consequences of engaging in what is seen as illicit behaviour.

The incidence of honour killings is very difficult to determine and estimates vary widely. In most countries data on honour killings is not collected systematically, and many of these killings are reported by the families as suicides or accidents and registered as such. Although honour killings are often associated with the Asian continent, especially the Middle East and South Asia, they occur all over the world. In 2000, the United Nations estimated that 5,000 women were victims of honour killings each year. According to BBC, "Woman's advocacy groups, however, suspect that more than 20,000 women are killed worldwide each year." Murder is not the only form of honour crime, other crimes such as acid attacks, abduction, mutilations, beatings occur; in 2010 the UK police recorded at least 2,823 such crimes.

The cultural features which lead to honour killings are complex. Honour killings involve violence and fear as a tool of maintaining control. Honour killings are argued to have their origin among nomadic peoples and herdsmen: such populations carry all their valuables with them and risk having them stolen, and do not have proper recourse to law. As a result, inspiring fear, using aggression, and cultivating a reputation for violent revenge in order to protect property are preferred to other behaviours. In societies where there is a weak rule of law, people must build fierce reputations.

Views on Women

Honour killings are often a result of strongly patriarchal views on women, and the position of women in society. In these traditional male dominated societies women are dependent first on their father and then on their husband, whom they are expected to obey. Women are viewed as property and not as individuals with their own agency. As such, they must submit to male authority figures in the family—failure to do so can result in extreme violence as punishment. Violence is seen as a way of ensuring compliance and preventing rebellion. “Women are considered the property of the males in their family irrespective of their class, ethnic, or religious group. The owner of the property has the right to decide its fate. The concept of ownership has turned women into a commodity which can be exchanged, bought and sold” (Shahid Khan). In such cultures, women are not allowed to take control over their bodies and sexuality: these are the property of the males of the family, the father (and other male relatives) who must ensure virginity until marriage; and then the husband to whom his wife’s sexuality is subordinated a woman must not undermine the ownership rights of her guardian by engaging in premarital sex or adultery.

Conclusion

In our society with high morals, ethos and values, where the women are worshiped as goddess, some are brutally killed on the name of honour. This rate of honour crime is increasing day by day. So there is an urgent need of an introspection of society, the legal measures available and the need of more effective remedies.

Law definitely can play an, important role in curbing honour killings, but, it alone cannot stop such killings, since, it is a sociological issue, which is deeply rooted in social culture, traditions and mindset. The vulnerability of women around the world to this type of violence will only be reduced when these patriarchal mindsets are challenged and effectively confronted. Another, great liberator may be the economic status of women. Education can also play an important role. An economically independent woman can be more powerful, and capable of taking her own decisions. This kind of change in our socio, economic conditions and stringent law can only be helpful in reducing the number of honour crimes.

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