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HONOR KILLING - AN OXYMORON?

We call it “Honor Killing”, the French refer to it as “crime d’honneur”, Italians describe it as “delitto d’onore” and the Germans see it as “Ehrenmord”, where “Ehre” translates into “honor” and “Mord” describes the act that is committed as “murder”, which is defined in The New Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language as: “The act of unlawfully killing a human being with premeditated malice.” Honor killings are distinguishable from crimes of passion by the fact that they are premeditated in comparison to crimes of passion which are committed at the spur of the moment. It may interest you to know that the French penal code – and this one was in effect until 1975! – commuted the sentence of a husband who had caught his wife *in flagrante delicto*. Unfortunately, I was unable to find out what would have happened if the roles had been reversed.

Before discussing the issue of honor killings, let me just share with you how I was drawn to this topic. Two books, which I had found in a small bookstore in the U.K., put me on the path of wanting to know more about the practice of honor killings. The first book was, and here I quote a statement on the cover of the book: “The International Bestseller Forbidden Love,.... an extraordinary true story....a shocking and dramatic testimony to the courage and strength of women who are

prepared to defy generations of male dominance”. The title of the US edition is “Honor Lost”. After the book was released for publication in 2004, it became an immediate success. However, during the last year, a little “twist” occurred: Norma Khouri, the book’s author, has been challenged by several sources claiming that the book is not an autobiography which, of course, should bear the element of truth, but, to a large extent, a fabrication. Even if the accusations are valid, I still intend to use some parts of her book to make a point in reference to honor killings in modern day Jordan. The fact that honor killings still happen today in Jordan cannot be denied; and in this way there is some validity to her book. The other book is titled “Burned Alive”. It was written by Souad in collaboration with Marie-Thérèse Cuny. This book is an autobiography as validated by medical records and also by the fact that members of the Swiss Humanitarian Group Terre des Hommes, who helped Souad leave her country to establish a new identity and life in France, have documented this incidence of attempted honor killing.

In order to discuss the issue of Honor Killings, one first has to understand what it entails, in other words, it has to be defined. The definition and history of ‘honor’ is a very broad topic which can easily become a paper by itself. I shall only define ‘honor’ in the context of honor killings. In societies where honor killings occur, the definition of ‘honor’ is reputation. In a ‘culture of honor’ a man’s action is guided by how his deeds are judged or may be judged by members of the community. In such a society, man becomes the law. This, of course, contrasts sharply with the rules by which ‘cultures of law’ operate, where the laws have to be obeyed by all. An honor killing is the practice

by which a designated male member of a family kills, speak murders, a female relative who has acted in a “shameful” way or who is just perceived as having displayed inappropriate behavior – and please notice the word perceived, no solid evidence is needed – a man can just state that his family was shamed by the alleged perpetrator, thus justifying an honor killing: or, as it is also expressed: “he has an obligation to cleanse his house”, he has to restore his honor, his reputation. A woman’s refusal to submit to an arranged marriage, asking for divorce, adultery, failing to serve a meal on time, receiving phone calls from men without prior approval by a male member of the household, flirting with a man, “allowing”! herself to be raped, just to mention a few, are considered “immoral behavior” which have to be remedied. As a brief insert, in patriarchal societies where arranged marriages are common, a woman who has been raped has become “worthless” to the family, since no future husband will pay the customary bride price. Honor killings are frequently carried out by underage male members of the family because this act is often seen as a right of passage into manhood for an underage male and the sentence is even less than for him than for an adult or almost nonexistent. The killings are performed by strangulation, decapitation, poisoning, stoning, stabbing, shooting, acid burning with the intent to severely disfigure the victim and forcing her to drink the acid, or immolation as was the method used in Souad’s case where her brother-in-law poured gasoline over her and set her afire. Some victims are also buried alive!

The phenomenon of honor killing is most commonly seen in the Middle East, leading to the flawed conclusion that this practice has its roots in

Islam. The origins of honor killing, however, go further back in time, actually, way back even before Christianity was “born”. It has been known since the Codes of Hammurabi and Assyria (about 1700BCE) and it arose out of tribal/Bedouin laws in which a woman’s chastity or virginity was the property of the family. In cultures of honor, or originally in nomadic cultures, men had to protect and defend their most valuable possessions. Swift revenge and retaliation in response to insult or assault often guaranteed survival, increased the safety of property, and also portrayed a strong character to members of his group or tribe. Thus, honor became synonymous with reputation, strength, and dominance. Of course, the bottom line of male dominance was to secure reproductive control. Other ancient societies that practiced honor killings, were, among others, Peru and Ancient Rome. According to “Wikipedia” the situation was as follows in Peru (and this custom was in effect from 1200BCE – 1532CE): if a man caught his wife to be unfaithful, or, if he just suspected it, he was allowed to kill her, however, if a wife caught her husband under similar circumstances and she killed him, she was punished by death. And, referring to ancient Roman times, where the male head of household, the *pater familias*, had the right to kill an unmarried daughter if she engaged in premarital sex and also had a right to kill an unfaithful wife.

According to statistics, in the regions with the largest Muslim population, Indonesia, one rarely hears of honor killings. Unfortunately, modern day Islamic men who condone honor killings refer to a passage in the Koran, seeing it as a religious act:

“Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). Good women are obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them and scourge them.”

The expression “scourge them” is interpreted by the ones promoting honor killings as: “kill them”. At this point I would like to put a disclaimer in: I am not a religious scholar trained and qualified to interpret the Koran. I am only quoting a paragraph of the Holy Book which apparently is used to justify an honor killing or, as some men see it, as their duty to uphold the family’s honor. Also, I would like to state that there are plenty of men in the Arab world that are appalled by the practice of honor killings for it also says in the Koran:

“Whoso slayeth a believer of set purpose, his reward is Hell for ever. Allah is wroth against him and He hath cursed him and prepared for him an awful doom”.

The phenomenon of honor killing does not only occur in Muslim countries like Jordan, Palestine, Pakistan, Afghanistan, some remote regions of India, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Kurdish regions within Turkey, but also in the western world. Cases among immigrant populations were reported in France, Sweden, Germany, U.K., Canada, and even the United States. Consequently, it has become a global issue and has to be addressed as such!

Before further analyzing the complexity and dilemma of honor killings, I would like to quote three documented cases of honor killing. The first paragraph of Norma Khouri's book "Forbidden Love" is meant to set the tone for the quotations that follow:

"Jordan is a place where men in sand-coloured business suits hold cell phones to one ear and, in the other, hear the whispers of harsh and ancient laws blowing in from the desert. It is a place where a worldly young queen argues eloquently on CNN for human rights, while a father in a middle-class suburb slits his daughter's throat for committing the most innocent breach of old Bedouin codes of honour.

It is a place of paradox and double standards for men and women....Modern on the surface, it is an unforgiving desert...."

The first case was reported by Julian Borger in the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* and it refers to a case in Jordan:

"Rania Arafat's two aunts came to take her for a walk. They told the 21-year-old niece they had arranged a secret meeting with her boyfriend. She strolled with them through a suburb where Amman's concrete sprawl peters out into the desert. When the three women reached a patch of open land, the aunts suddenly stepped aside, leaving Rania standing alone. She was shot four times in the back of the head at close range and once in the forehead. The gunman was her 17-year-old brother, Rami.... Rania's crime was to refuse an arranged marriage.... Rami is in jail, but unlikely to be sentenced to more than a few months,

especially as he is a minor, which is almost certainly why he was given the role of executioner.”

The next case describes an honor killing in Pakistan where it is known as *KaroKari*. The National Geographic News reported in February 2002:

“...the murder took place in broad daylight, was abetted by the victim’s mother, who was a doctor, and occurred in the office of Asma Jahangir, a prominent Pakistani lawyer and the UN reporter on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions.

In April 1999 Samia Imran, a 28-year-old woman seeking a divorce from her violent husband after 10 years of marriage, reluctantly agreed to meet her mother in a lawyer’s office in Lahore, Pakistan. Imran’s family opposed the divorce and considered her seeking a divorce to be shaming to the family’s honor. Her mother arrived at the lawyer’s office with a male companion, who immediately shot and killed Imran.....No one was ever arrested for Imran’s death....”

The last quotation is taken from Norma Khouri’s book “Forbidden Love”:

“Lina, a twenty-four old Jordanian girl, became pregnant after being raped by a neighbor. When the pregnancy became apparent to her family, they decided to kill her. On 24 September 1998, her brother drove her to a nearby football field, parked the car and asked her to get out. He then repeatedly struck her on the head with a rock, drew a knife, slashed her throat and

stomach, left her by the side of the road, and went to turn himself in. His family treated him like a hero and later posted bail for him, bringing a white stallion to ride home. He was sentenced to three months in prison, but was instantly released because he had served that amount of time waiting for the trial, even though he had been out on bail the entire time.”

The list of documented cases of honor killings is long and filled with unimaginable emotional and physical suffering and so much blood; nobody knows the exact number of honor killings that never make it to the public. Radhika Coomaraswamy states in her publication “Cultural Practices that are violent Towards Women” that over 70% of all murders in Gaza and the West Bank were honor killings. In Jordan, one in four homicides in a given year is an honor killing, that is 25%, as quoted by Asma Jahangir in “Civil and Political Rights Including the Question of: Disappearances and Summary Executions”. The record for Pakistan is not much better, where it is estimated that every day at least three women become victim of this horrific practice.

In recent years, however, a new direction in honor killings surfaced: *Honor Suicides*. Pressure of Human Rights Groups and an expanded awareness of the practice of honor killings outside the countries where it occurs, have already led to some changes in the penal code of, for example, Turkey, where an honor killing may be punishable by a sentence of life in prison. Instead of actively killing a female who has shamed the family, she is now pressured into taking her own life, because the family’s honor still has to be restored and this can only be

achieved by eliminating the source that caused dishonor. I do wonder, if female suicide bombers may actually fall into the category of honor suicides. (?)

Both, honor killings and the manipulation of pressuring another human being into committing honor suicide are one of the most severe Human Rights violations. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that all human beings are born free and equal and guarantees every person on earth the universal and unalienable right to lead a life free of oppression and fear, regardless of gender, race, religion, or ethnicity. However, it also grants groups self-determination and freedom to practice their cultural traditions without interference. Beautiful thoughts, but there is a dilemma: What happens if in a country religious and cultural traditions are contradictory to or severely conflict with the rights given to all men and women? Which right should prevail? The individual right or the right of an ancient, traditional code which has been passed on from generation to generation and which condones and strongly promotes harmful cultural practices against women? Practices which allow men to murder women without even giving them a chance speak up in their defense? Unfortunately, penal codes, especially Article 340 and Article 97 and 98 of Jordan's penal code are quite forgiving towards men after they have committed an honor crime. Attempts to modify or eliminate these articles, have been defeated twice in recent years. Similar codes exist in Syria and Morocco. International and domestic pressure has led Pakistan to enact a law in December 2004, making honor killings punishable by a prison term of seven years or, in the most severe cases, punishable by death,

which, of course, as yet, still has to happen. The accused killer still has the right to negotiate a pardon as guaranteed under the “Islamic Provisions”.

At this point, I would like to give you a brief “taste” of Souad’s life, a life no child on earth should be exposed to: her mother had twelve girls and one son. Only four girls survived, most of the others, younger than Souad, were smothered by their mother right after birth, as witnessed on several occasions by Souad; a clear case of female infanticide. The memory she has of her father is as follows: “He was small and mean....he was all-powerful, the king of the household, who owned, decided, hit and tortured us. In my country a man takes a wife to have sons and serve him as a slave, like the daughters who will come, if she has the misfortune to produce any. A day without beating was unusual. The girls and women were beaten in other houses, too. It was the law of men.” Souad lived in constant fear of beatings. She also feared that what she had witnessed her mother do to the newborn, might happen to her at night. “As long as I lived with my parents, I feared I would die suddenly.” She also witnessed her younger sister being strangled by her brother with a telephone cord while the parents were out. When she herself became a victim of attempted murder, she understood the pattern: again, her parents were out while her brother-in-law immolated her with gasoline and ignited her; what was her “crime”? She had become sexually involved with the young man who had asked for her hand via her father; she knew she was committing a grave sin but took the risk. The desire to escape the misery at home, the powerful longing for being loved, made her give in to the advances of

her future, so she hoped, husband. The third time she had intercourse left her pregnant and when she spoke to her “fiancé” about it, he disappeared from the village never to be seen by Souad again. When the pregnancy became apparent to her parents, Souad was not allowed to leave the house anymore and her father decided to give the job of “taking care” of Souad to the brother-in-law. When Souad was in flames and already severely burned, she still had the strength to climb over the high wall that surrounded the property. Women in the village extinguished the flames and arranged for Souad to be driven to a hospital in the city to be left there to die, which probably would have happened if SURGIR, a Swiss Human Rights Group had not intervened on her behalf. I also would like to add that, when Souad’s parents learned that she was still alive, Souad’s mother was sent to the hospital with the instructions, to restore the family’s honor, to finish the job by forcing her daughter to drink a cup of acid the mother had brought with her to the hospital for that purpose. Fortunately, a British educated physician entered the room right at the time when Souad was instructed to drink the acid; he was able to prevent a terrible death. Souad, while on her year-long road to recovery often asked herself if it would not have been better to let her die....She now lives in a free country but her physical and emotional scars are constant reminders of the distant life she once lead.

The question that arises is: can something be done to put an end to the horrific practice of honor killings and if so, how should one proceed? As briefly touched on before, International Human Rights laws have little effect on countries whose penal code condones honor killings. It is

my opinion that the awareness and acceptance of gender equality in those regions has to be the first step to put an end to violence against women. The guarantee of gender equality in all aspects of life has to be incorporated into the law. Women have to be able to freely seek legal protection if needed without fear of painful or deadly consequences. Yes, women in Jordan can ask the prison system for protection if the danger of becoming a victim of an honor killing is imminent, however, if they wish to leave the prison again, a husband or brother or other male relative has to sign the papers for her release but these men are usually the ones she has to most fear. Countries that still condone honor killings have to adjust or reverse their penal codes to the effect that “honor” is taken out of the honor killing; it has to be seen for what it is; it is violent, premeditated murder and it has to be judged as such. One also has to take a look at who actually wrote the existing laws and history! All created by men, as far as I know, although approximately half of the population was and is female. I see a great opportunity here to practice gender equality by getting women involved in redefining existing discriminatory laws to the effect that domestic violence becomes an offense. Men who see and practice honor killings in compliance with their cultural traditions, have to be taught that not all traditions have value. There is no honor in murdering another human being. It is an inhumane practice. The problem of honor killings is not only an issue of morality, it is a problem of male dominance and disrespect of women who are viewed as servants to the family and a man’s property which can be disposed of at will. This is misogyny in its purest form! Men condoning and practicing honor killings are actually slaves of the limbic part of their brains where the desire of reproductive power and

dominance reign supreme. In such a society, neither female nor male are free: both are confined to and restricted by gender roles. They shall never experience the beauty of a true partnership between a women and a man, something that Souad has found in her life despite her disfiguration.

Before closing, I would like to make one more statement: There is a Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights in place which was signed by the group's secretary general in Paris on September 19, 1981. Superficially, the document conveys a message of guaranteeing gender equality but a statement in the document's foreword already sheds some doubt on its realization: "Human rights in Islam are firmly rooted in the belief that God, and God alone, is the Law Giver and the Source of all human rights. Due to their Divine origin, no ruler, government, assembly or authority can curtail or violate in any way the human rights conferred by God, nor can they be surrendered." The dogma and divine rules as expressed in Sharia Law are incompatible with the fundamental principles of democracy. It is my opinion that as long as there is not a separation of church and state in Islamic countries, the hope of ever eradicating the practice of honor killings remains a doubtful one.