

## **A twisted sense of honor**

*Imagine that you are an adolescent boy living in Afghanistan. One day your older sister is raped while walking home from her weekly trip to the market on the other side of your village. Afterward, she sits in the corner sobbing, with blood stains smearing her hijab. You are so angry at the man who did this horrible thing to your sister that you fantasize about killing him. He should have to pay for his actions. Instead, your father tells you that you must kill your sister, who bears the stain of this crime. You cannot understand why you must do this – you tell your father that you love your sister, and you will not kill her; after all, she did not commit a crime, her rapist did. Your father explains the importance of your family's honor and says that unless you kill your sister, all of your relatives will be scorned by the community. Without restoring this honor, your family has no future. He says that he would kill her himself, but he has approached you instead because there is less of a chance that you will go to jail for doing it. He tells you the plan: wait until your sister is alone in the house, away from your other siblings, then stab her. He hands you a knife.*

This sounds like a scene from a twisted horror film, but in certain parts of the world, honor killings are a sad reality. Entrenched in culture rather than religious convictions, honor killings take place all over the world, from Brazil, to Iraq, to Turkey. While concrete statistics on honor killings are often impossible to gather, it is evident that a significant number of these crimes continue to occur. In Palestine, as many 70 percent of all homicides may be honor killings<sup>1</sup>. An honor killing is defined as the execution of a woman by members of her family based on a perceived stain to the family's honor<sup>2</sup>. Rape, incest and dowry disputes are the most common reasons why honor killings happen, along with extra- and pre-marital sex. The rapists and perpetrators of honor killings operate with total impunity in certain places. When family members are tried for murdering their wives, daughters, or sisters, they often receive light sentences, as honor killings are not considered as serious as other homicides by certain countries' judicial systems.

According to [Dr. Catherine Warrick](#), a professor within American University's Department of Government, prosecuting honor killings presents many problems. Under some countries' criminal codes, honor killings are treated as crimes of passion, and therefore are punished less severely than other homicides, even though many of these murders are clearly premeditated. Often police do not investigate thoroughly when honor killings occur, calling them suicides because they privately sympathize with the perpetrators. While some may have the misconception that honor killings are mandated by Shari'a law, the Islamic legal does not call for them, and it specifically prohibits vigilante justice. Christians as well as Muslims have committed honor killings.

What can we do to end the barbaric practice of honor killings? At a [Congressional Human Rights Caucus](#) briefing on the practice, [Charlotte Ponticelli](#) and [Gretchen Birkle](#) of the State Department advised Congressmen [Trent Franks](#) and [Jerrold Nadler](#) that a three-pronged strategy of raising awareness, educating both men and women, and enforcing criminal codes was necessary to break the cycle of familial violence. Radio

programs by women, for women which are operating in countries where women face honor killings have had success in increasing public consciousness about these crimes, Ponticelli and Birkle said. Literacy is also a key component to ending honor killings; if women cannot read, they cannot learn their rights within society. Finally, the US government must put pressure on other governments that look the other way when honor killings occur, and reaffirm its stance that promoting global respect for women is a non-negotiable demand.

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<sup>1</sup> “During the summer of 1997, Khaled Al-Qudra, then Attorney General in the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), told Sout Al-Nissa' (Women's Voices), a supplement published by the Women's Affairs Technical Committee (WATC), that he suspects that 70 percent of all murders in Gaza and the West Bank are honor killings.” – [Suzanne Ruggi, Jerusalem Times](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Wikipedia](#)

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