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## To Specify or Single Out: Should We Use the Term “Honor Killing”?

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## Abstract

The use of the term ‘honor killing’ has elicited strong reactions from a variety of groups for years; but the recent Aqsa Parvez and Aasiya Hassan cases have brought a renewed interest from women’s rights activists, community leaders, and law enforcement to study the term and come to a consensus on its validity and usefulness, particularly in the North American and European Diaspora. While some aver that the term ‘honor killing’ is an appropriate description of a unique and particular crime, others deem it as rather a racist and misleading phrase used to promote violent stereotypes of particular communities, particularly Muslim minorities in North America and Europe. This article works to lay the groundwork by presenting both sides of the debate over the term ‘honor killing’ and analyzing the arguments various groups use in order to justify their particular definition of the term, and if and how they support its use in public discourse. I argue two main points: one, that ‘honor killing’ exists as a specific form of violence against women, having particular characteristics that warrants its classification as a unique category of violence. Second, I show that while ‘honor killings’ are recognized as such in many non-Western contexts, there is a trend among advocacy organizations in the North American and European Diaspora to avoid, ignore, or rebuke the term ‘honor killings’ as a misleading label that is racist, xenophobic, and/or harmful to Muslim populations. This is a direct response to the misuse of the term mostly within media outlets and public discourse that serves to further marginalize Muslim and immigrant groups.

**KEYWORDS:** violence against women, Muslim diaspora, gender, honor killing, human rights

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## INTRODUCTION

On December 10, 2008, Aqsa Parvez, a Canadian teenager of Pakistani origin, was murdered by her father in their home in Mississauga, Ontario by strangulation. Less than one year later, journalist Mary Rogan wrote an article concerning her death in *Toronto Life Magazine* under the title "Girl, Interrupted," sub-headed by the following lines:

Aqsa Parvez had a choice: wear a hijab to please her devout family or take it off and be like her friends. She paid for her decision with her life. When her father and brother were charged with her murder, it raised the spectre of religious zealotry in the suburbs. Is this the price of multiculturalism? (Rogan 2008)<sup>1</sup>

Within days, the blogosphere had erupted in debate over Rogan's article and implications of Parvez's death. Perhaps the most heated discussion surrounded the use of the controversial term "honor killing,"<sup>2</sup> and whether it is an appropriate description of a unique and particular crime, or rather a racist and misleading phrase used to promote violent stereotypes of particular communities, particularly Muslim minorities in North America and Europe.

As a human rights activist, independent researcher, and the daughter of a Muslim Iranian-American, I was following the Aqsa Parvez case closely as a researcher for the Global Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women, which works to end violence against women justified in the name of "culture," "religion," or "tradition." I had previously done work on stoning and other violent abuses of women's human rights in Iran for Women Living Under Muslim Laws, an international solidarity network for women whose lives are shaped or affected by laws said to derive from Islam. WLUML was coordinating the Global Campaign to Stop Killing and Stoning Women and approached me to help with the initial research work that would be used to frame the campaign strategy, and I was commissioned to conduct research on honor killings in "Western" contexts. By this time, the Aqsa Parvez case had become a "hot topic" in Canada and I was particularly interested in the controversy surrounding use of the term "honor killing," as this issue is central to internal debates within the Campaign and many women's rights advocacy organizations such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws.

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<sup>1</sup> Rogan, Mary. "Girl, Interrupted." *Toronto Life*. December 2008.

<<http://www.torontolife.com/features/girl-interrupted>> Date of Access: January 2009.

<sup>2</sup> I use the American spelling of "honor" in this paper, except when quoting the words of others, when I will use their respective spellings.

In the midst of my research, another case caught my attention as well as the interest of many media outlets. In February of 2009, Aasiya Hassan, a woman from Buffalo, New York was decapitated by her husband. Aasiya's husband Muzzammil Hassan was a prominent Buffalo businessman of Pakistani origin who was considered a well-known leader in the Muslim community after founding Bridges TV to improve the image of Muslim Americans after September 11. Aasiya was his third wife, his previous two divorcing him on grounds of abuse. Shortly before her murder, Aasiya Hassan had recently obtained a restraining order against her husband in order to protect herself from (further) domestic violence and abuse. Sadly, Aasiya was unable to escape and was found murdered by beheading on February 12, 2009.

Almost immediately after Aasiya's death, media reports began to throw around terms such as "honor killing," "Sharia," and "Islamic law" in their coverage of the case. Many media reports used "expert" testimony from scholars such as Phyllis Chesler, who argued that "the fierce and gruesome nature of this murder signals it's an honor killing" (Rhett Miller 2009).<sup>3</sup> In response, some commentators and advocacy groups strongly rebuked the use of the term to label the death of Aasiya:

The media response has been to toss around phrases like "honor killing" and "Sharia law," despite the fact that we haven't heard a thing from the authorities or the murderer that would indicate Hassan was killed to preserve her family's honor, or that Sharia played into it at all. The thought process seems to be, "They're Muslim and so this must have been a Sharia-based honor killing."... It comes down to this: "Honor killings" are worse than "regular" domestic violence murders. How do you spot an honor killing? Well, it's done by a Muslim. Why is an honor killing worse? Because it's done by a Muslim. (Feministe 2009)<sup>4</sup>

While Chesler and others continued to argue that Aasiya's was murdered for honor, there soon emerged a wealth of responses by Muslim clerics, community leaders, scholars, and other commentators who all added to a growing consensus that Aasiya's murder, while the worst imaginable kind of domestic violence, did not appear to be an honor killing.

If Aasiya's murder was not an honor killing, why did many media outlets label it as such? Furthermore, instead of arguing that the case did not fall into the specific criteria for "honor killing," many advocacy groups in Europe and North America exclaimed instead that "honor killings" did not exist at all; that there was

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<sup>3</sup> <<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,494785,00.html>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> <<http://www.feministe.us/blog/archives/2009/02/24/on-aasiyah-hassan/>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

no difference between “honor killings” and domestic violence. Meanwhile, their counterparts continued to use the term “honor killing” in their work in the Middle East and South Asia. What accounts for this discrepancy?

The use of the term “honor killing” has elicited strong reactions from a variety of groups for years; but the Aqsa Parvez and Aasiya Hassan cases have brought a renewed interest from women’s rights activists, community leaders, and law enforcement to study the term and come to a consensus on its validity and usefulness, particularly in the North American and European Diaspora. This article works to lay the groundwork by presenting both sides of the debate over the term “honor killing” and analyzing the arguments various groups use in order to justify their particular definition of the term, and if and how they support its use in public discourse. I argue two main points: first, that “honor killing” exists as a specific form of violence against women, having particular characteristics that warrant its classification as a unique category of violence. Second, I show that while “honor killings” are recognized as such in many non-Western contexts, there is a trend among advocacy organizations in the North American and European Diaspora to avoid, ignore, or rebuke the term “honor killings” as a misleading label that is racist, xenophobic, and/or harmful to Muslim populations. This is a direct response to misuse of the term mostly within media outlets and public discourse that serves to further marginalize Muslim and immigrant groups.

The purpose of this article is to clearly present and analyze the most significant perspectives in order to better understand how we as scholars, activists, policy makers, and concerned community members can better serve the survivors of these crimes and those at risk. This article is also meant to empower women who wish to combat honor-related and other forms of violence against women but who also acknowledge the damage racism and Islamophobia does to their communities, particularly in the Diaspora. By clearly displaying and analyzing the issues and debates around “honor killing,” I hope to add to the work started by Muslim and immigrant women’s rights advocates in building a discourse that is both anti-violence and anti-racist.

Here a note a methodology is appropriate. The debate surrounding the use of the term “honor killing” is informed by many different groups with various agendas, locales, and perspectives. This article will include perspectives from academics, scholars and researchers; women’s rights and other non-governmental organizations; leaders and spokespeople from Muslim, Arab, and/or Asian communities both at their origins and in the Diaspora; politicians and policy-makers; and law enforcements officials. The use of blogs in this article also deserves special explanation. Because blogs are a relatively new media form, no standards have yet been set for how scholars or activists should use them, particularly when analyzing an issue such as honor killing. However, for women in some settings, blogs and internet sites are some of the few sources of public

expression. Furthermore, with the decline of print media in North America and Europe, blogs are increasingly becoming a common space in which civil society and activists can engage in dialogue with one another as well as with women on the ground. In this piece, I use blogs in order to reflect commonly held arguments among certain groups. For example, when analyzing how a mainstream media (e.g. newspapers, network television) piece represents honor killing, I am interested in the reactions to that particular report by civil society organizations or members of particular groups and communities. Blogs, I believe, are a legitimate way to gauge such reactions. At the same time, we should be cautious in the way we use *any* media form in order to avoid unfair generalizations or essential conclusions of groups. It should be noted that some blogs are more respected within the academic spheres, civil society, and activist world than others, and I chose carefully based on these considerations.

#### THE RELEVANCE OF NAMING

The use of the term “honor killing” has important implications. The attacks on September 11, 2001, followed by wars in two Muslim-majority countries and an intensely controversial domestic “War on Terror” campaigns in the United States and other nations have led to the growing public fascination in North America and Europe with Islam, Muslim culture, and particularly violent Muslim men (Razack 2008). In this climate, human rights violations within Muslim communities, both worldwide as well within the Diaspora in the “West,” have not only become the subject of best-selling books and films, but have been used as the ideological and moral justification for war between the “West” and the “Muslim world” (Razack 2008).<sup>5</sup>

In recent years, discussions over honor killings and other culturally-specific violence against women have been framed within the “clash of civilizations” discourse in Europe and North America. The “culture clash” logic was made prolific by Samuel P. Huntington’s famous book *Clash of Civilizations*, in which he argued that the primary source of conflict in the world today is the “cultural” difference between the “West” and the “non-West.” Here, Islam is presented as the predominant antithesis to Western civilization and culture; Islam and the “West” have been at war for fourteen hundred years, a conflict that originates from the essential difference between the two cultures. What makes the Culture Clash logic unique is that it is entirely ahistorical: “The causes of this ongoing pattern of conflict lie not in transitory phenomena such as twelfth-

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this paper, I use the “West” to refer to mainstream, white, Judeo-Christian culture in Europe as well as the United States, Canada, and Israel, to which these debates often refer. I use this phrase mostly in quotation marks because I do not wish to imply that there exists such a homogenous culture, just as I make no claims that there exists a homogenous “Muslim World.”

century Christian passion or twentieth-century Muslim fundamentalism. They flow from the *nature* of the two religions and civilizations based on them” (Huntington 1996: 212) (Emphasis mine.) Thus all cultural phenomenon *in* Muslim regions can be seen as *because* of Islam.

When “culture” is presented as ahistorical, or essentialized, it cannot be extracted from race or racism. Of course, the presentation of “culture” as ahistorical is nothing new. The argument for culture being the driving force of history and not a product of it was first seen in the emergence of “racialized” thinking in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, which mostly served to ideologically justify colonization of peoples in the New World, Asia, and Africa and demonize Jews in Germany as the “other,” providing an intellectual basis for nationalism and imperialism in the face of supposedly egalitarian ideals of the Enlightenment.<sup>6</sup> By making culture and race synonymous, one can judge the level of superiority of a particular race using a cultural standard.

In the Culture Clash logic, the “West” is presented as having values and modernity while the non-West, or “Muslim world,” has ancient and immutable culture; the logic ends with the declared superiority of “Western” culture, which is seen less as “culture” and more as “values,” including a unique commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rights of women. Here, not only are “Westerners” homogenized, but so is the Muslim other, thus consolidating membership in each group with normative values placed on their culture and civilization. The same logic, ironically, is applied by those in Muslim communities in order to present their superiority over “Western” nations.<sup>7</sup>

When the Culture Clash logic is applied to discussion on human rights abuse and violence against women, it can be seen as “Culture Talk” (Mamdani 2005), which assumes “that every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and it then explains politics as a consequence of that essence... It is no longer the market (capitalism), nor the state (democracy), but culture (modernity) that is said to be the dividing line between those in favor of a peaceful, civic existence and those inclined to terror” (Mamdani 2005). When feminists use Culture Talk to discuss human rights abuses such as “honor killings” that occur among (but are not limited to) Muslim populations, the result is an ideological reinforcement of Clash of Civilizations, and the cooptation of feminist and human rights rhetoric to underpin racism. “Honor Killings” are “cultural” not in the sense of a changing, fluid culture but as an immutable, essentialized culture. They are placed in the same category as forced, early and arranged marriages, the veil, female genital mutilation, and female seclusion as elements that make Muslim culture inherently

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance, Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s *Foundations of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, 1899; Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau *The Inequality of Human Race*, 1855.

<sup>7</sup> For an example of this, see Parvin Paidar’s discussion of *gharbzadegi* and Ali Shariati’s writings in *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran*, 1995.

worse than Western values and modernity. In this way, discussion over “honor killings” can and is being used to permanently stigmatize Muslim communities and evict them from the political community, especially when these communities are minorities in the North American and European countries (Razack 2008).

Thus the terms “honor killing” and “domestic violence” are often used as proxies for discussion over Muslims and the “West,” respectively. When “honor killings” are seen as something separate from “domestic violence,” Muslim culture is reinforced as something separate from Western culture; even if both potentially harm women, they are essentially different and one is almost always seen as worse than the other, depending on who is talking. On the other hand, when “honor killing” is presented as inextricable from “domestic violence,” difference is removed, both in the sense of the crime and the culture/race/religion of the people involved.

Beyond just rhetoric, the way we define “honor killing” in conjunction with domestic violence has real affects within public policy and the justice system. For instance, in 2005 the United Kingdom introduced the Domestic Violence, Crimes, and Victims Act, which offered legislative changes to the way domestic violence is addressed in the criminal and civil justice systems. However, the document was widely criticized by many women’s groups who argued that the bill failed to address issues affecting black and minority women (Siddiqui 2005: 275). Particularly problematic was the narrow definition of domestic violence as concerning only intimate partners. As we will see, “honor crimes” most often include violence perpetrated by other family and community members, and many feared the bill would fail to protect potential victims of these and other culturally specific forms of violence unless “honor” was taken into account in the writing of the law.

Women's groups themselves differ vastly in their approaches to this problem. In the United Kingdom, for instance, a divergence of strategies emerged following the death of Heshu Yones in 2002 in an apparent “honor killing.” Many Middle Eastern women’s groups, which composed of Kurdish, Iraqi, and Iranian women, wanted to approach Yones' murder by separating “honor killing” from domestic violence. Their reasoning was that domestic violence is often trivialized by the wider community and is not regarded by the state as a serious problem. On the other hand, Southall Black Sisters and other groups made up predominately by South Asian women argued that the issue of “honor killing” had to be integrated into the wider framework of domestic violence and could not be extracted from it in order to prevent a racist reaction from the state (Siddiqui 2005: 276). By singling out “honor killing” from domestic violence, they argued, we risk not only downplaying domestic violence as something less serious, but singling out immigrant communities for their apparent “backwards” values and human rights abuses.

As we will see more below, the physical and cultural location of these groups often affect their strategies. The difference in perspectives in the above example most likely stemmed from the fact that the Middle Eastern groups had been less active in the United Kingdom than in struggles in their own homelands (Siddiqui 2005: 276). In many of these countries, “honor killing” are treated more leniently than other murders by the state and/or social norms, and, not coincidentally, so is domestic violence. The connotation of “honor killing” less as murder and more as a private, family or cultural matter, engenders the need to make a clear distinction.

On the other hand, many of the South Asian groups have long been active within the United Kingdom and had been eyewitness to racist backlashes common to such debates (Siddiqui 2005: 276). They have been more intimately acquainted with the Culture Clash and Culture Talk logics, and have seen how quickly a discussion over “honor killing” can turn into a discussion over multiculturalism, identity conflicts, and the “danger inherent” in Muslim immigration.

The question of whether a specific strategy pertaining to “honor killing” is appropriate remains the subject of controversial debate. The danger in making separate categories for “honor killing,” which usually focuses on minority women, and “domestic violence” has been the fear of differential treatment towards immigrant communities. The problem is how to address issues of “honor killing” and domestic violence so that the state, justice, and legal systems provide for the specific needs of minority and/or immigrant women without singling them out for racist or xenophobic treatment (Siddiqui 2005: 275). Thus the main question remains: to specify, or single out?

#### WHAT IS HONOR?

Definitions of the term “honor killing” are diverse and disparate; there is no definite consensus over what constitutes “honor killing.” The phrase itself is often consorted with a variety of pseudo-synonyms and subgroups, such as “honor crimes,” “honor based violence,” and “so-called honor killing.” In fact, much debate surrounding the use of the term “honor killing” in actuality centers on its definition and connotations. In order to better understand the debate, this section and the next will explore the various definitions of honor and honor killing being used among activist circles, non-governmental organizations, policy-makers, scholars, and community leaders. We will see how these definitions affect the way the term is used, to what crimes it is applied, and under which circumstances.

Issues surrounding translation and semantics are at the core of the honor killing debate. “Honor” is a poetic and often convoluted term that has held a wide variety of meanings in the English language over a period of centuries. Furthermore, words that are often translated as “honor” in other languages very

often carry their own special qualities that get lost in translation. In fact, *honor* may translate in several different words in languages such as Kurdish, Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, each with their own particular connotations. For instance, the Kurdish and Turkish word *namus* is generally used in the context of purity or propriety of women, while *shirif* can refer to other norms of morality including hospitality, courage, and so on (Wikan 2008: 58). The *namus* conception of honor, which holds a special importance for our purposes, is generally seen as residing in the bodies of women. Frameworks of honor carry a close corollary with shame, and operate to control, direct, and regulate women's sexuality and freedom of movement by men in their family (Sen 2005: 46-50; Coomaraswamy 2005: xi). For a man and his family, *namus* can be understood as the sexual integrity and chastity of the women in the family, e.g. mother, wives, sisters, and daughters. *Namus* is sometimes specified in a *code of honor*, or a set of rules stating what is and what is not part of the honor system. The pith of the code is that honor can be lost. It's "losability" is what is essential for our understanding of honor in honor killing (Stewart 1994: 140).

This is different than *shirif*, which can be understood as a more hierarchical notion, one that can be increased or decreased depending on individual's moral standing within the community. When *namus* is lost, the honor is completely lost, affecting the entire person, his quality and reputation within the eyes of the honor group (Sen 2005: 51). Dishonor necessitates publicity; it is a public phenomenon. Honor in this way is in the eye of the beholder, and dealing with dishonor becomes essential only when it is known among the community.

It is important to realize that honor in many communities a matter of self-interest, a necessary condition for social, economic, and political survival. As Wikan puts it:

Honor is not a luxury, not a sideline, but crucial to welfare, status and position—things that matter everywhere. In some societies, the welfare state protects (or should protect) the citizen's interests. In others, the family or clan has similar functions. And in some, the citizen amounts to nothing—and can achieve nothing—without honor. (Wikan 2008: 64)

These nuances get lost in our translation of "honor." Not only does the word carry variegated spectrum of meanings in English, but it also represents a specific set of definitions in other societies that are concealed by our translation.

#### WHAT IS "HONOR KILLING"?

Unni Wikan defines honor killing as "a murder carried out in order to restore honor, not just for a single person but a collective. This presupposes the approval

of a supportive audience, ready to reward murder with honor.” (Wikan 2008: 73). Other definitions may differ some, but a number of features seems to be constant. First, honor killings almost always involve the murder of a woman by her family members. Usually the killer is a brother, father, cousin, paternal uncle or husband of the victim. Also, other women are often involved in the planning of the murder or cover up afterwards, if not the murder itself (Sen 2005: 50). Most often, the perpetrator(s) comes from the victim’s family of birth, not her family of marriage. This is because even after marriage, a woman’s honor tends to be linked to the family of birth since they are the ones who raised her and hence are responsible for her sense of shame and chastity (Sen 3005: 46; Wikan 2008: 73).

Second, the perpetrator is usually not acting alone. There is either an explicit or implicit approval or even encouragement by other members of the family to commit murder (ICAHK 2008).<sup>8</sup> This is because honor must be restored for the collective, not just the individual. Honor killing necessitates a supportive audience who will condone murder and reward it with honor restored (Sen 2005: 50-52). Such cases are extremely difficult to try in court, as we shall see later, because family members are often unwilling to testify, and often are direct accomplices to the murder. Furthermore, potential victims of honor killing have few trusted people to which they can turn in a time of crisis, as the risk of honor killing generally involves everyone in the family.

Third, suspicion is usually enough to prompt an honor crime. As long as the rumor exists among the community of a woman shaming her family’s honor, even if there is no evidence, the men have been dishonored. Wikan calls this the “public” aspect of honor killing (Wikan 2008: 76). Previous documentation of honor killing cases illustrates the importance of image and appearances of those involved above proof, evidence, or personal conviction. Thus if a woman does commit adultery, but no one outside of the family knows, an honor killing is much less likely to occur than if the entire community has its suspicions about the woman in question, even if no adultery had taken place. Quite often, honor killings happen because the victim has “been away from home” or “comes back late” (ICAHK 2008).<sup>9</sup> While there is nothing to prove any wrongdoing, the visual lack of control by her male kin sends a message to the community that his honor has been lost. “Ninety percent of the cases that occur are based on just rumor and suspicion,” says Norma Khoui, who wrote a 2003 book in response to a Jordanian

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<sup>8</sup> <<http://www.stophonourkillings.com/?name=Blogs&file=display&id=24>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> <<http://www.stophonourkillings.com/?name=Blogs&file=display&id=24>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

honor killing. “So ninety percent of the women that are killed are still virgins at the time of death” (BBC 2003).<sup>10</sup>

Finally, many experts on honor killing insist that an essential characteristic of the crime is that it is premeditated (Sen 2005, Wikan 2008). Honor killings, they say, are planned crimes, usually among the men in the family or community authorities, and meticulously carried out. This qualification is important in distinguishing honor killing from other acts such as “crimes of passion” (Sen 2005: 50-51).<sup>11</sup>

It is essential to recognize that honor killings, or what most people understand them to be, can be found across religions and faiths (Wikan 2008, Siddiqui 2005: 265). My own research has compiled instances of honor killings among Muslims, Christians, Jews, Yezidis, Druze, Sikhs, Hindus, and non-believers. For several reasons, however, there is a commonly held belief among those in Europe and North America that honor killing is a strictly Muslim phenomenon. In 2000, Asma Jahangir, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions stated in her annual report that “the practice of ‘honour killings’ is more prevalent although not limited to countries where the majority of the population is Muslim.”<sup>12</sup> This perhaps led to the common association between Islam and “honour killings” (Sen 2005). While some Muslims indeed commit honor killing, the notion that Islam condones honor killing is a misconception. Murder is not prescribed to cleanse honor in any major interpretation of Sharia (or Islamic law), including in the Quran or hadith (sayings and traditions of the Prophet.) Furthermore, many reputable Islamic scholars and clerics have spoken out against the practice of honor killings. Even highly conservative or “fundamentalist” Muslim groups have denounced the practice. For instance, Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, an influential Shiite cleric and spiritual leader of Hezbollah, issued a *fatwa* (religious decree) banning honor killing, describing it as “a repulsive act, condemned and prohibited by religion” (Zoepf 2007).<sup>13</sup>

In fact, many laws that excuse honor killings (see further discussion below) do not trace back to Islamic law but are rather derived from the Napoleonic code and are remnants of colonialism. Article 324 of the Napoleonic Penal Code states that murder committed by a husband on his wife is excusable if the wife has committed adultery (France 1810).<sup>14</sup> This law, as implemented in

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<sup>10</sup> BBC 2003: <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/2802305.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2802305.stm)> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> For more information on the similarities and difference between “crimes of passion” and “crimes of honor,” see Connors 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on extra-judicial summary or arbitrary executions, UN Doc. E/CN.4/2000/3, 25 January 2000, para. 78.

<sup>13</sup> Zoepf, Katherine in New York Times 23 September 2007.

<sup>14</sup> France 1810: <<http://www.napoleon->

many colonized nations, has been misappropriated and entangled with various cultural notions of "honor," providing a convoluted mixture of justifications for honor killing stemming from Muslim, cultural, and colonialist sources.

It cannot be overstated that conceptions of honor are controversial, even in societies where honor killings occur with some frequency. There is no consensus, in any community, over how notions of honor should be carried out in practice. For instance, in Pakistan, anti-honor-killing advocates are adamant in their assertion that men are also killed in the name of honor, and some claim that as many men are killed as women in "*karo kari*" ("black man, black woman") honor dynamics (Malick et. al. 2001). In other areas, however, men are rarely killed for violating honor codes. Honor, like any "cultural" practice or tradition, is not immutable or static, but rather an organic, changing, and lived experience through individuals with agency and choice. The descriptions of honor made above are generalizations observed and reported, but never by neutral individuals. Honor can mean different things in different groups and settings, varied by time and space.

Perhaps this is why some find the term "honor killing" so vexing. We can describe the conditions in which honor killings are most likely to occur, but many times these conditions exist without an honor killing taking place. Likewise, there are some instances of honor killing that do not fit this description, and we are tempted to question whether they should be called honor killing at all.

#### HONOR KILLINGS IN NON-WESTERN CONTEXTS: MURDER IS MURDER

One of the most problematic and disturbing elements of honor killing is that it is often condoned and treated more leniently than other murders. We see this both under the laws of some countries, as well as by non-state political authorities. In some countries, "honor killings" have a clear precedent of being considered the same as murder, and perpetrators are punished according to the penal codes regarding murder. However, in many other countries, national legislation legitimizes honor killing, or the killing of women by their relatives for sexual deviance.<sup>15</sup>

According to former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, its Causes and Consequences, Radhika Coomaraswamy, practices such as honor killing represent forms of violence that until recently have

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[series.org/research/government/france/penalcode/c\\_penalcode3b.html](http://series.org/research/government/france/penalcode/c_penalcode3b.html)> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> These include Penal Code articles 239, 240, 241, and 242 in Syria; Article 340 in Jordan. Recently Before the reform of Turkish law as part of entering the European Union, honor killings were often treated leniently in court. Pakistan also has a judicial history of providing leniency for honor killings.

escaped national and international scrutiny because they are often presented as “traditional” or “culturally” sanctioned practices that require tolerance and respect (Coomaraswamy 2005: xi); Coomaraswamy herself played an important role in bringing the issue of honor killing from women’s rights movements to the forefront of the human rights debate. According to international human rights norms, honor killing violates the following universal human rights: right to life, liberty and bodily integrity; the prohibition on torture and other cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment or punishments; the prohibition on slavery; the right to freedom from gender-based discrimination, sexual abuse and exploitation; the right to privacy, to marry and found a family; the duty of states to modify customs that discriminate against women; and the right to an effective remedy (Coomaraswamy 2005: xii).

The fact that honor killing and honor-related crimes are treated with more leniency than comparable crimes have prompted many activists and human rights defenders to reiterate the mantra that “murder is murder.” These critics wish to disband the legal classification of honor killing in order to make courts treat it same as murder in terms of prosecution and sentencing. For them the term “honor killing” reinforces the argument undergirding the above legislation that one’s “culture” justifies and legitimizes killing in this particular situation, and thus decriminalizes the act. As one blogger posts: “ ‘Honor killing’ is a shameful crime, but it is also shameful that everyone continues to use this term to describe it. It is an insult to all the victims, and a source of pride to their murderers” (ICAHK 2008a). Some suggest the terms “shame” or “dishonor” killing. But these too are problematic, because they take the language of the perpetrator and his rationale as the more significant aspect.

Using the terms “shame” or “dishonor” killings also ignores the fact that many view honor killings as an essentially “private” matter in which the state has no business interfering, as opposed to murder, which is a crime against public safety. The idea is to advocate for a rethinking of the private/public dichotomy that has historically been heavily criticized by feminists and women’s rights defenders. As one judge explained to an anti-honor killing activist:

Daughter, there is a leniency towards honor killings here [in Kuwait City]. Neither the police, nor the court, nor the government can interfere with inter-familial business. In the case of punishments, they are not too severe. In a society where the girl’s honor and obedience is deemed very important, honor killings are an exception. (ICAHK 2008a)

## HONOR KILLINGS IN WESTERN CONTEXTS: A DOUBLE STANDARD

The above arguments against the term “honor killings” do not negate the concept that honor killings exist as a specific type of crime. While they aver that honor killings are no less wrong than other murders, they do not dismiss that honor killings carry specific characteristics that make them unique in other ways. However, many others are strongly opposed to the term “honor killing” because they argue that there is no difference between so-called honor killings and other forms of domestic violence and that the term “honor killings” is only used to refer to domestic violence among Muslim, Arab, or South Asian communities. This double standard is reflected in the term “honor killing.”

These opponents of the term are not convinced that honor killing carries unique characteristics that make it categorically different from other crimes involving the murder of a woman as a response to her sexual deviance. They argue that the phrase insinuates that Muslim or “Brown” culture is more patriarchal, inhumane, and violent than Western cultures. The term reflects the Culture Clash and Culture Talk logics, implying that only immigrant peoples have “culture” or “tradition,” while the “West” is modern and post-cultural. Communities that commit honor killing are “backward” peoples, and while there are many murders that occur in the West, honor crimes are by definition more terrible and horrific than domestic violence that occurs among white people. As one blogger states: “When it comes to Muslims and domestic violence, the violence is somehow exoticized in a way that “regular domestic violence” is not in the United States” (MuslimahMediaWatch 2009.)

Sobia, another blogger, illustrates her problem with the term:

I think a part of the problem many have with the term honour killings is (1) because it is usually associated with brown people (whether Muslims or Sikhs); (2) because how can we say that the women who are murdered in North America (I'm North American) by their spouses are not murdered for honor?... Part of the reason the Diaspora has an issue with the word could be because we see women from other cultural/religious groups murdered for what often appear to be issues of honor, yet they are not labeled as such. (MuslimahMediaWatch 2009a)

Sobia's second point reflects a common criticism of the term “honor killing”: is honor killing just domestic violence or spousal murder by another name? And why are cases of intimate partner violence in the Europe or North America never classified as honor killing unless they involve Muslims or Middle Eastern/South Asian immigrants? In the United States, 1,181 women were murdered by an intimate partner in 2005, an average of three women a day. Of all the women

murdered in the U.S., about one-third were killed by an intimate partner (United States Department of Justice 2007). These crimes, too, reflect a patriarchal culture meant to control women's sexuality and limit their choices and bodily mobility. And yet the media pays a disproportionately little amount of attention to these crimes according to critics.

Furthermore, many critics point out that Western media erroneously use the term "honor killing," even when no honor dynamics are at stake. As we have seen, honor killing involve a specific set of criteria that make it unique from other forms of domestic or intimate partner violence. Just the fact that a murder of a woman has occurred in a Muslim/Arab/South Asian community does not warrant the label "honor killing." However, media reports often label particular crimes "honor killing" for the sole reason that they occur among Muslims and/or South Asians. The gruesome murder of Aasiya Hassan provides a useful illustration of a scenario in which the media dubiously applies the label "honor killing." Aasiya was decapitated by her husband, Muzzammil, after attempting to get a divorce as well as a restraining order against him for domestic abuse. Ironically, Muzzammil was heralded as a respected pillar of Buffalo's Muslim community after founding Bridges TV, a network aimed to combat negative stereotypes of Muslim-American immigrants, even though he clearly had a reputation of being violent after his previous two marriages ended due to domestic violence. After Aasiya was murdered, reporters flocked to the case, broadcasting the crime as an "honor killing." Their evidence was primarily the gruesome nature in which Aasiya was killed; decapitation often serves as an image connected with Muslim extremism, terrorism, and "backwards" culture—"honor killing" seemed to fit part and parcel with these other notions.

Aasiya's horrendous murder provided a wake-up call to many in the Muslim community as well as outside of it concerning how we use the term "honor killing." Although many of the details of this case have yet to be broadcast at time of writing, we can reasonably assume that Aasiya's murder was probably not an honor killing using the four criteria explained above. First Aasiya was murdered by her husband, not her kin members, which is more rare in honor motivated crimes. Second, all evidence points to Muzzammil acting alone. Honor killings almost always involve other members of the family or honor group. But by all police reports, Muzzammil was acting alone, without either the explicit or implicit help or approval of family members. Third, honor killings are motivated by the public "dishonoring" of men by their female relatives; but no such thing occurred in this case. Yes, Aasiya has asked for a divorce, but so did Muzzammil's first and second wives, and no honor crime had been attempted in those cases. Why should he be so dishonored now? Fourth, we are still unsure as to whether this crime was premeditated. Perhaps most importantly, an honor killing necessitates an accepted, even if informal, code of honor that exists to

legitimate murder and rewards it with honor (Wikan 2008: 248). We cannot establish that such a code existed in this case.

The case of Aasiya Hassan reminds us the danger in concluding that a murder is an honor killing, even when it occurs among Muslims, even when there are good grounds that the perpetrator felt disgraced, and even when the victim did something that transgressed sexual norms. It seems that media reports labeled this incident an honor killing not because of the specific dynamics of the crime but because of the perpetrator and victim's nationalities and religion.

In short, those who wish to remove the demarcation between "honor killing" and domestic violence point to a double standard fueled by a Culture Clash and Culture talk logic. Western media gives a disproportional amount of attention to intimate partner violence in immigrant communities by labeling them as a uniquely disturbing phenomenon, "honor killings." Even though rates of rape, sexual harassment, and inter-family murder are staggeringly high in the "West," the media singles out Muslim and other immigrant communities for perpetrating these types of crimes, thereby ignoring the whole truth concerning violence against women. This seeming hypocrisy has led many to question the term "honor killing."

#### HONOR KILLING AS A RACIST, XENOPHOBIC, OR ISLAMAPHOBIC TERM

As we have already seen, honor killings occur across many faiths as well as among non-believers. Nevertheless, honor-based violence has been strongly connoted with Islam by the Western media. Phyllis Chesler, emeriti professor of psychology and women's studies at Richmond College of the City University of New York, is often cited on the topic due to her study demonstrating that the "overwhelming majority" of honor killings are perpetrated by Muslims. Although her sample size is very small (40), Professor Chesler argues that her study suggests that:

honor killing is accelerating in North America and may correlate with the numbers of first generation immigrants. The problem is diverse but originates with immigration from majority Muslim countries and regions—the Palestinian territories, the Kurdish regions of Turkey and Iraq, majority Muslim countries in the Balkans, Bangladesh, Egypt, and Afghanistan. Pakistanis account of the plurality. *The common denominator in each case is not culture but religion* (Chesler 2009). [Emphasis mine]

However, upon closer inspection, we find that Chesler's study is seriously flawed, both in methodology and logic. For instance, while she correctly implies that *cultures* among immigrants from Muslim countries are diverse and varied, she

“Honor Killing” News Reports Dec. 06 – Mar. 09	
Country	Number of Cases
Belgium	1
Canada	2
Egypt	2
Germany	2
India	27
Iran	2
Iraq	3
Israel/Palestine	10
Italy	1
Jordan	11
Morocco	1
Norway	1
Pakistan	22
Saudi Arabia	1
Syria	5
Turkey	7
United Arab Emirates	1
United Kingdom	2
United States	2
	Total: 103

**Figure 1**

ignores the similar fact that *religious interpretation* among immigrants from Muslim countries differ tremendously as well. There is no mention of the fact that honor killings are nearly unheard of Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country, or in Senegal, Nigeria, and many other areas of the “Muslim World”. Also, as we have seen, a substantial amount of honor killings occur among peoples of other faiths, such as Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, as well as among non-believers. Perhaps most importantly, there is nothing in the Quran or hadith (sayings and doings of the Prophet) that serves to condone anything related to honor killing, and there is a clear consensus among Muslim clerics and religious scholars that Islam prohibits honor killings (Welchman and Hossain 2005: 13; Connors 2005: 35). Clearly the “common denominator” is not Islam.

In analyzing such Chesler’s data, we must also take into serious account possible media biases. Chesler’s study was formed on the basis of media reports; there is no reason to believe she investigated these crimes herself on the ground. While Chestler's study comprised of honor killing cases in North America and Europe, I have compiled my own data set made up of media reports on honor

killings and honor-related violence in English-language media outlets<sup>16</sup> worldwide in 2007 to time of writing (March 2009). While insufficient to prove theories concerning the ethnic, religious, or cultural roots of honor killings, the data can show us a possible trend concerning media bias.<sup>17</sup>

In short, whenever the honor killing occurred in the “West” (North America, Europe, Australia, Israel), the media report made explicit the race, ethnicity, nationality, and/or religion of those involved (See Appendix for full data.) Of the 103 cases compiled, one occurred in Belgium, two in Canada, two in Germany, ten in Israel/Palestine, one in Italy, one in Norway, two in the United Kingdom, and two in the United States. In every one of these media reports, explicit and specific mention of the perpetrator and/or victim’s ethnic background was discussed. For example, in all ten of the Israel/Palestine cases, the news article reported the victim/perpetrator as Palestinian, Arab, or residing in an Arab community. The same trend is seen in news reports dealing with honor crimes in other “Western” nations.

This trend of discussing the victim/perpetrator’s ethnic background or immigrant status is not seen, however, in the vast majority of other cases. When the crime occurs in Pakistan or India, for example, no mention is made of religion or race. Of the six cases occurring in Turkey, one report mentioned the victim was Kurdish, i.e. an ethnic minority. Of the 25 cases in Pakistan, only one article described the victim by their religion, which was Hindu, i.e. a religious minority, in that case. Perhaps most surprisingly, of the 29 cases occurring in India, only 5 mentioned the specific caste of the victim(s.) There was no mention, however, of the Hindu, Sikh, Muslim or other religious affiliation of the victims or perpetrators. While some may argue that South Asian readers can easily decipher the ethnic/religious affiliation of the subjects in South Asian cases by their names, the focus of the article is not on the ethnic/religious affiliation in these reports. On the other hand, the ethnic/religious background or immigrant status is explicit in “Western” cases; the article does not “leave it to the reader,” but rather focuses in on this aspect of the story.

What can this trend tell us? First, honor killings are rarely put into context in media reports; it is no wonder the public discourse is confused as to the nature of honor killings. Second, media reports tend to portray honor killings in a misleading way, focusing on the immigrant status of the perpetrators rather on the criminological or cultural dynamics of honor, as explained in earlier sections of this paper. This reflects that honor killing are most often connoted with Arab

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<sup>16</sup> These sources vary in location (some are local, others are international), but they can all be considered “mainstream,” independent news sources.

<sup>17</sup> This insufficiency is due to the same reasons why I found Chesler’s data insufficient, namely the following statistical limitations: too few cases (104); bias towards English-language media reports; cases occurred only in the last few years; and so on.

and/or South Asian immigrants in the West, particular the Muslim community, even though Islam is not at the root of honor killing.

The criticism over whether the media paid unnecessary attention to the subject's faith and ethnicity were heightened by reports over Aqsa Parvez's and Aasiya Hassan's murders. Media profiles on the Parvez and Hassan cases were similar in that they were both labeled "honor killing" (we will see below if these labels were justified), focused on issues surrounding "Muslim culture," clash of civilizations, multiculturalism, and the repercussions of Muslims immigrating to the West.

Country	Name of Victim	Month	Year	Ethnicity/Race/Nationality/Religion of victim/perpetrator
<b>Belgium</b>	Sadia Sheikh <sup>18</sup>	August	2008	Pakistani
<b>Canada</b>	Aqsa Parvez <sup>19</sup>	December	2007	Muslim, Pakistani
	Murawt Tuncar <sup>20</sup>	February	2009	Turkish
<b>Germany</b>	Sazan Bajuez Abdullah <sup>21</sup>	October	2006	Kurdish
	Morsal <sup>22</sup>	December	2008	Afghani
<b>Israel/Palestine</b>	En'am Jabar Deifallah <sup>23</sup>	August	2007	Palestinian
	Hamda Abu Ghanem <sup>24</sup>	January	2007	Arab
	Nahed Hija <sup>25</sup>	July	2007	Palestinian
	Suha Hija <sup>26</sup>	July	2007	Palestinian
	Lina Hija <sup>27</sup>	July	2007	Palestinian

<sup>18</sup><<http://www.wluml.org/french/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd%5B157%5D=x-157-558461>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>19</sup><<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20071212.wlfathers12/BNStory/lifeMain/home>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>20</sup><<http://stop-stoning.org/node/537>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>21</sup><<http://www.stophonourkillings.com/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=2075>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>22</sup><[http://www.metimes.com/Security/2008/12/17/brutal\\_honor\\_killing\\_case\\_opens\\_in\\_germany/1e7d/](http://www.metimes.com/Security/2008/12/17/brutal_honor_killing_case_opens_in_germany/1e7d/)> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>23</sup><<http://stop-stoning.org/node/285>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>24</sup><<http://stop-stoning.org/node/318>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>25</sup><<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1184766034076&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>26</sup><<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1184766034076&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

Terman: Should We Use the Term "Honor Killing"?

	Unknown <sup>28</sup>	June	2008	Palestinian
	Khouloud Mohaammad Al-Najjar <sup>29</sup>	June	2008	Palestinian
	<sup>30</sup>	February	2009	Arab
	Unknown <sup>31</sup>	January	2009	Arab, Muslim
	Unknown <sup>32</sup>	January	2009	Arab
<b>Italy</b>	Hina Saleem <sup>33</sup>	August	2006	Muslim
<b>Norway</b>	Banaz Bakir Fatah <sup>34</sup>	July	2008	Muslim
<b>United Kingdom</b>	Lidia Motylska <sup>35</sup>	November	2008	Victim: Catholic, Perpetrator: Muslim
<b>United States</b>	Sandeela Kanwal <sup>36</sup>	July	2008	Pakistani
	Fauzia A. Mohammad <sup>37</sup>	January	2009	Muslim

**Figure 2**

For instance, many of the articles profiling the Parvez case gave a large amount of attention to role disputes over the hijab—or Muslim headscarf—played in the murder. This point was scrutinized by many who believed such a report was

<sup>27</sup> <<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1184766034076&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>>

<sup>28</sup> <<http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2008/09/02/55854.html>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> <<http://www.pchrgaza.org/files/PressR/English/2008/55-2008.html>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>30</sup> <<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3668507,00.html>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>31</sup> <<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/News.aspx/129394>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>32</sup> <<http://www.israeltoday.co.il/default.aspx?tabid=178&nid=18192>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> <<http://www.stophonourkillings.com/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1922>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>34</sup> <<http://www.stophonourkillings.com/?name=News&file=article&sid=2823>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> <<http://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/Muslim-killed-Catholic-girl-in.4684216.jp>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> <<http://stop-stoning.org/node/307>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> <<http://www.democratandchronicle.com/article/20090107/NEWS01/90107033/1002/NEWS>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

a sensationalist and negative depiction of Muslim immigrants, many of whom do not wear the hijab and go free of family disapproval. As the International Campaign Against Honor Killings argues:

The debate around media reports on Aqsa Parvez are superficial because of the fixation with hijab expressed in media reports, many of which assume that Aqsa's enjoyment of Western dress was the trigger factor in her father's decision to kill her. However, while this may have been a bone of contention within the family, if I had been asked to assess the risk to Aqsa Parvez, I would have noted that her most severe infringement of the "honor" code was leaving the family home. (ICAHK 2008)<sup>38</sup>

The fact that many media reports paid a dubious amount of attention to the hijab in the Parvez case highlights many women's apprehension and distrust about the term "honor killing" as a mechanism of isolating Muslim and immigrant communities in the West.

Furthermore, how can we distinguish between a correlation of honor killing and Muslim background and a possible causation? Such a study would be exceptionally difficult, because as we have seen, notions of honor are more rooted in culture and tradition rather than religion, and also because it is extremely difficult to quantitatively rate the religious convictions of individuals. This is perhaps the fatal flaw of Chesler's data as well as other media reports concerning honor killings in the West. Consider the hypothetical case of man from Afghanistan, a predominately Muslim country, who was raised in a mildly religious Muslim household and later moved to a Northern European country. There he actively practices no religion, and does not raise his family with any particular faith. If he commits an honor killing, will an objective onlooker portray him as a Muslim man? Will the crime be said to have occurred among the Muslim community?

#### BACKLASH AGAINST THE TERM "HONOR KILLING"

By supposedly singling out the Muslim, Middle Eastern, and South Asian communities for their more "barbaric" domestic violence tendencies, the term "honor killing" has caused what can be seen as backlash within these communities living in the Diaspora. In a post-911 world, human rights abuses in the Muslim world have often be used as justifications for harmful discrimination

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<sup>38</sup> <<http://www.stophonourkillings.com/?name=Blogs&file=display&id=24>> Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

against Muslims, especially in North America and Europe, and even war.<sup>39</sup> Sometimes these human rights violations have been distorted to appear more numerous or relevant in particular contexts. In combination with Culture Clash and Culture Talk logics, critics accuse these reports of igniting fear among those in the West, fanning the flames of xenophobia and Islamaphobia.

Considering the strong anti-Muslim sentiment and misconstrued essentializing of Islam in many media reports and studies, it is no surprise that Muslim communities often act to distance themselves from honor killing. Perhaps the most widely published example of this came from Mohamed Elmasry of the Canadian Islamic Congress, who was quoted in response to Aqsa Parvez's death as saying: "I don't want the public to think that this is really an Islamic issue or an immigrant issue. It's a teenager issue" (Rogan 2008).

After the Toronto Life's article on Aqsa Parvez was published, many Muslim advocacy groups, as well as immigrant and feminist groups, gathered to register their protest over the piece (CBC 2008). Many of these groups, as well as commentators on the blogosphere, noted that Aqsa Parvez represented just one incident of domestic violence, and not an "honor killing" connoting a Muslim cultural or religious problem. As Imam Zaid Shakir states:

[T]o use the existence of [honor] killings to smear Islam shows the desperation and misplaces priorities of many of those levying such attacks. Most of those deaths are the pathetic acts of sick individuals, who are far removed from the letter... and the spirit of Islam... At the end of the day, attacks such as the one that resulted in the death of Aqsa Parvez are acts of domestic violence resulting from rage that emanates from a total neglect of Islamic teachings. Ms. Parvez lost her life due to such violence and perhaps there are a few other instances where Muslim women in Canada or here in the United States, have been similarly victimized. However, these instances should be kept in perspective (Shakir 2008).

Shaker acknowledges that Aqsa Parvez's murder was an honor killing and, in the same statement, denounces it as completely wrong and un-Islamic. But many others are quick to criticize the use of the term "honor killing" to cases they deem as individual acts and not cultural phenomenon.

The result of using "honor killings" within Culture Clash and Culture Talk framework has been not only the demonization of Muslims and immigrants in the "West," but a kind of anti-racist backlash against the team. Now, some groups (mostly in the Diaspora in North America and Europe) argue that there exists no such thing as "honor killing," that it is *only* domestic violence committed by

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<sup>39</sup> Many commentators used the call to "save" Afghan women as a justification for the USA invading Afghanistan in 2001.

particular ethnic or religious groups, and that it serves *only* the purpose of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia.

DANGERS IN AVOIDING THE TERM “HONOR KILLING”:

Sheila Vahdati, an Iranian-American commentator, recognizes that honor killings exist in Muslim communities, but feels the term is inappropriate in the United States in the case of Aasiya because:

When the term “honor killing” is applied to what happened to Aasiya it serves to separate us and our laws from the gruesome violence that led to her death...It is comforting for us to realize that they were a Muslim family, and what happened to them was a result of their culture or religion. We comfortably sever any ties with the reality of their life in the United States and blame them, and “their” culture, for what happened (Vahdati, 2009).

Vahdati worries that by labeling Aasiya’s murder as an honor killing, Americans will pigeonhole the incident as something that has nothing to do with them, and thereby more easily ignore the rampant problem of domestic violence that cuts across all social levels in the United States. But does this problem – “it’s them, not me” — also apply to Muslim and immigrant communities when it comes to honor killings? As we have seen, there has been much effort to distance the Muslim community from honor killings; to discredit the term as racist, Islamophobic, or inappropriate; and to demonstrate that incidences of so-called honor killings in the Muslim community are nothing more than individual acts of domestic violence. Certainly Islam is not the “common denominator” or the problem when it comes to honor killings. But what are the consequences of such a strategy?

Some minority women’s groups who acknowledge that honor killings are a problem among immigrant groups in Europe and North America and work to combat them are often criticized by various elements. On one hand, they are vulnerable to attack by conservative forces on the grounds that they represent “inauthenticity,” “Westernization,” and “secularism” for not respecting indigenous honor culture, particularly if they working on sexuality-related issues and violence against women (Welchman and Hossein 2005:18). Ironically, they are sometimes criticized by progressive or leftist groups “washing our dirty laundry in public” (Siddiqui 2005: 274). Members of the anti-racist coalition accuse minority women’s groups, such as the Southall Black Sisters in London, for undermining the anti-racist struggle and causing a racist backlash against such

abuses as honor killings, as evident by the use of use of immigration controls to tackle forced marriages in the United Kingdom (Siddiqui 2005: 274).

Sheila Musaji makes an excellent point in my opinion that “[Honor killing] *is not a Muslim problem* because it crosses all religious lines, but it *is a Muslim problem* because it also exists in our community” (Musaji, 2007). Some fear that the aforementioned response by Muslim and immigrant advocacy groups will cause honor killings to go unreported for fear of demonizing the Muslim and Asian immigrant communities in the West. We have no idea what was going through Aasiya Hassan’s head before she was murdered, but we do know that she tried to receive help multiple times and did not. We also know that her husband had a reputation for his history of domestic violence and abuse, but was still lauded and respected as a pillar of the Muslim community in Buffalo, New York (Hairston 2009). Is it possible that the fear of demonizing the Muslim community discouraged family friends from intervening in the situation, or encouraged Aasiya to remain silent about her experience with abuse? Even though it is questionable whether Aasiya was a victim of an honor crime, it is important to ask: How did the discourse surrounding honor killing and Islamophobia interfere the handling of this situation, and how do we prevent further cases from happening?

Many minority women’s groups point out that when ignored, honor dynamics serve to harm women in Western courts. Two examples provide illustration of this point. In the first case, Zoorah Shah, a British-Pakistani woman, is currently serving life for killing her violent long-term boyfriend Mohammed Azam. Zoorah, who is illiterate, killed Azam after he subjected her to twelve years of rape, including forcing her to sexual exploitation with other men, and a growing sexual interest in Zoorah's teenage daughters. After failing to get help from Azam's brother, who reported he was unable to do anything, Zoorah poisoned Azam in desperation. At trial, Zoorah pleaded innocent but was convicted of murder. However, after receiving counseling with Southall Black Sisters, Zoorah confessed. She reported that she felt unable to explain her actions earlier because of the “shame” and “dishonor” that would have consumed her had she admitted her history with sexual violence to her conservative community. However, the Court of Appeal dismissed her appeal, deeming her story “beyond belief,” not taking into account the cultural notions of honor that proved so vital to this case (Siddiqui 2005: 267).

The second case is Kiranjit Ahluwalia, a British-Indian woman, who was also convicted of murder after killing her violent husband. “Honor” had also acted to prevent Kiranjit not only from leaving her husband but to admitting to the context of the crime. In this case, however, Kiranjit was able to secure an appeal and was released from prison, following expert and legal representations and a public campaign. The Court of Appeal eventually took into consideration the

cultural context of honor in which Kiranjit acted. These two cases show us that by failing to acknowledge the role of honor, the justice system often fails to understand or explain the impact of cultural pressures on women experiencing violence in minority communities, thus leaving it unable to effectively remedy the situation (Siddiqui 2005: 267-8).

#### THE CASE FOR USING THE TERM “HONOR KILLING”:

As we have seen, the use of the term “honor killing,” particularly in media reports, has been strongly criticized by those who believe that the term negatively stereotypes Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians. But not everyone concurs with the notion that “honor killing” should be avoided altogether. In this section, I examine arguments for why the term “honor killing” is appropriate in national discourses, particular in North America and Europe. Congruently, I inspect possible risks in avoiding or ignoring “honor killings” or treating them as synonymous with domestic and/or intimate partner violence. Special focus will be paid to the use of “honor killing” rhetoric in prevention programs, law enforcement, and court settings in North American and European contexts.

Many advocacy groups believe that “honor killing” is a crucial term and cannot be avoided. As the International Campaign Against Honor Killing puts it: “The distinction of ‘honor killing’ from other related forms of patriarchal violence is important to us and our work. We also work with the protection of women and girls from domestic violence as well as ‘honor killing’ with a very different procedure in place for each form” (ICAHK 2008). Groups that utilize the term “honor killing” do so because they believe honor-related crimes carry particular characteristics that necessitate a different course of action than other forms of domestic violence.

A potential “honor killing” presents several challenges to law enforcement, courts, and agencies working for the protection of women. First, as we have seen, perpetrators of honor killings rarely work alone. Members of large extended families often take part with the implicit or explicit approval of the rest of the community. In short, there is often a conspiracy against potential victims of honor killings (Siddiqui 2005: 265). By avoiding the dynamics of honor, we risk the failure to bring many perpetrators to justice. In Turkey, for example, mandatory sentencing for honor-related murders have led many families to force the youngest brother to “pull the trigger” or actually commit the murder because he is often under the age of legal responsibility and will receive light punishment (Connors 2005: 31). This phenomenon has also been witnessed in cases of honor killings in North America and Europe as well. In order to fully prosecute those responsible for honor killings and bring those people to justice, our law enforcement system must be aware and knowledgeable about the dynamics of

honor in certain communities. Accessories or co-conspirators must be held accountable rather than the person that actually carried out the murder alone.

Second, because of the extent of the conspiracy that often surrounds honor killings, potential victims need special protection from social welfare agencies. It is not enough to return the woman to her family home after a time of “cooling off” or to send her to the care of relatives; either option puts her in grave harm. Furthermore, in the UK for instance, one in eight honor killings are committed by hit men hired by the family of the victim (ICAHK 2008), signifying a marked difference between honor killings and other forms of domestic violence. Witness protection-style programs must be developed for these special cases. Already in the United Kingdom several initiatives have been developed specifically targeting honor killings, such as honor-based violence phone hotlines, special conferences to counter honor-related abuse, and specific laws concerning forced marriages and honor based violence.<sup>40</sup>

Third, law enforcement must receive culturally appropriate training on honor crimes in order to best serve those they should be protecting. All too often we hear of cases in which women go to the police to reports threats of honor killing and are not taken seriously. Many times these women are later killed because law enforcement officials were not equipped with the skills needed to handle such situations. If honor killings were treated the same as domestic violence, we run the risk of failing to provide adequate safety for those who do come forward. We must also be aware of honor dynamics in order to recognize “honor suicides,” which is when a woman is pressured intensively by her family to commit suicide for the purposes of restating the family’s honor. The victim is told that she will be killed unless she commits the act herself, and this way, the family can avoid prosecution (Taylor 2009).

The International Campaign against Honor Killings makes a convincing point when arguing that better understanding of honor killing and not a subjugation of the term is necessary for learning from the Aqsa Parvez case:

Demanding that the experiences of girls and women with origins in “honor culture” submerge their particular experiences of male violence within the paradigm of the white majority is not helpful to giving these vulnerable women and girls the support they need. The most important question that Toronto should be asking itself is not about hijab, or about whether “honor” killing is Islamic, but why was Aqsa Parvez not under proper protection. Aqsa Parvez made contact with youth services: if these youth services had had proper training in the particular situations pertaining to

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<sup>40</sup> See: <<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/about-us/news/violent-crime-action-plan>> and <<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/about-us/news/forced-marriage-campaign>> for more details. Date of Access: June 1, 2009.

the lives of young Pakistani women, they could have detected the risk she was under and applied protection procedures.

The unfortunate ramifications of the campaigns on both sides to politicize the term “honor killing” limit the effectiveness of education campaigns for young people and the social workers and teachers there to help them, sacrificing more women on the altar of “honour” through refusing to acknowledge the risks they face. (ICAHK 2008)

I, as well as the ICAHK, agree with journalist Margaret Wentz’s commentary that to be specific is not to be racist (Wentz 2008). Using the term “honor killing” does not have to “single out” Muslims, Arabs, or South Asians for domestic violence that occurs in their communities. Rather, “honor killing” is a categorization that helps us with a specific phenomenon that require specific strategies for redress elimination. While “honor killings,” like other human rights abuses, may be co-opted by those whose ulterior motives are rooted in Islamophobia and xenophobia, this is no reason to avoid or ignore these human rights abuses or to be apologetic for them. Doing so helps no one. By ignoring “honor killings,” the Muslim and immigrant communities in the West give ammunition to xenophobic groups who say that Muslims do not care about violence against women and do nothing to stop it in their own communities. Furthermore, as we have seen, avoiding the discussion surrounding honor killings in the name of defending Islam may discourage potential victims to come forward and silence survivors. Lastly, unless we talk about what honor killings are, where they happen, who they happen to, and why, the media will continue to misrepresent honor killings due to this lack of knowledge. We should be focused on educating the public on honor killings by placing it in context.

#### CONCLUSIONS: “HONOR KILLING” AND MULTICULTURALISM:

To the extent that honor killings are often used as a lens to discuss larger issues of multiculturalism, immigration, and integration, I believe honor killings can be seen within the larger category of culturally-justified violence against women that is not limited to Muslim, Arab, or South Asian communities but that still exist among these groups of people. The fact is, many survivors of honor-based violence argue that harmful cultural, traditional, or religious beliefs and practices often become stricter within the immigrant community than they are at home. As Fadime Sahindal, who was killed in Sweden in a 2002 honor killing, related this point before she died. “Fadime claimed her parents, having arrived in a foreign place, had invented rules and called them ‘culture’ in order to control the girls... ‘culture’ is made stricter for Kurdish and Turkish girls living in Scandinavia than it is in Turkey” (Wikan 2008: 249).

The reasons for this phenomenon could be that immigrants who come to a foreign land are so scared of losing their identity that they hang on tight to cultural or traditional practices, even if they amplify their importance or take them to the extreme. Within the last few decades, there has been much feminist political scholarship arguing that women are seen as the main transmitters of social values and the primary boundary-makers of cultural and religious identity. Thus gender is highly politicized during times of significant social change, such as when a family moves to a foreign land much different from their own. This would make sense, considering the fact that even within families that hold strict cultural norms for their daughters, sons are usually free to adopt a "Western" lifestyle without being accused of losing his cultural identity.

Questions of integration are also relevant to the honor killing discussion, as we ask ourselves how we can eliminate harmful traditional practices while preserving diversity and respecting foreign cultures. Survivors of honor killings also say that their family felt they had nothing "at stake" in their new country, so that even after living there for up to 25 years, still felt marginalized, foreign, attacked. Before she was killed but while in exile from her family home and fearing for her safety, Fadime Sahindal once said in a speech to Swedish parliament: "If society had accepted its responsibility and helped my parents to feel that they had a greater stake in Swedish society, then perhaps this might have been avoided" (Wikan2008: 231).

From this we see that consequences from using the term honor killing engender a kind of vicious circle: When the media employs the term, it effectively serves to isolate minority and/or immigrant communities. This lack of integration works to reinforce "traditional" values and practices and cause families to impose a stricter, more severe enforcement of patriarchal aspects of "culture" within their communities. This in turn increases the likelihood of conditions that may cause honor killings, and the cycle continues.

Much fears has been stirred by the *Toronto Life* article on Aqsa Parvez and elsewhere that honor killings are a sign of the death of our morals at the hands of multiculturalism. These fears are certainly baseless, as hardly anyone is arguing that honor killings should be excused due to respect for culture. While "it was my culture that made me do it" has been used in Western courts as an argument for the defense in honor killing prosecutions, it (so far) has rarely worked. Honor killings occupy a strange position: they are often treated *less* severely than other murders or domestic violence in places like Jordan and Syria; at the same time, they are conveyed as *more* inhumane and terrible in places like the United States where they are usually committed by a minority. Where do honor killings fall in reality? And how do we break the cycle described above?

In order to best serve the potential victims of honor killings, we need to focus on educating the public on the truth about honor killings, in context and free

from fear-mongering or political manipulations. Advocacy organizations, especially those in the Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities around the globe, as well as individual women, need to acknowledge that honor killings exist, that they happen where they live, and that they are totally unacceptable. Lawmakers and representatives need to hear the truth about honor killings from legitimate experts, particularly survivors. Policy and decision makers need to address honor killings directly, while law enforcement should be trained on culturally appropriate ways to deal with honor based violence. The media should report on honor killings in a fair and balanced manner, avoiding sensationalist rhetoric and focusing on the facts.

Perhaps most importantly, we need to figure out how to fairly integrate Muslim, Arab, and South Asian immigrants into North American and European countries in a way that makes these immigrants feel they have a stake in their new society, are not marginalized or oppressed, and are valued as a free and equal citizen in a fair democracy. This includes supporting women working within their own communities at all levels, particularly those working to combat violence against women. As we have seen, the tension between the universality of human rights and cultural relativism often leaves women within these communities wary of the “arrogant gaze of critical outsiders,” thus silencing them (Coomaraswamy 2005: xiii). By supporting these women’s voices, we lessen the risk of a backlash and provide much needed support to women who are not only proud of their ethnic, religious, and/or cultural background, but say no to honor killing.

APPENDIX: CASES ON “HONOR KILLING” IN ENGLISH-LANGUAGE MEDIA OUTLETS: DECEMBER 2006—MARCH 2009

Name	Month	Year	Country	Religion/ Ethnicity/ Race/Caste/ Nationality
Sadia Sheikh <sup>i</sup>	August	2008	Belgium	Pakistani
Aqsa Parvez <sup>ii</sup>	December	2007	Canada	Muslim, Pakistani
Murawt Tuncar <sup>iii</sup>	February	2009	Canada	Turkish
Hoda Salem <sup>iv</sup>	December	2007	Egypt	
Unknown <sup>v</sup>	May	2008	Egypt	Egyptian
Sazan Bajuez Abdullah <sup>vi</sup>	October	2006	Germany	Kurdish
Morsal <sup>vii</sup>	December	2008	Germany	Afghani
Saroj <sup>viii</sup>	August	2007	India	
Baljit Kaur <sup>ix</sup>	July	2007	India	

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Ashwini Kumar <sup>x</sup>	July	2007	India	
Babli <sup>xi</sup>	June	2007	India	Jat Gotra (caste)
Manoj <sup>xii</sup>	June	2007	India	Jat Gotra (caste)
Ravinder Kaur <sup>xiii</sup>	April	2008	India	
Rekha Govaki <sup>xiv</sup>	April	2008	India	
Matma Singh <sup>xv</sup>	April	2008	India	
Banga Singh <sup>xvi</sup>	June	2008	India	
Salwinder Kauer <sup>xvii</sup>	June	2008	India	
Jyothi <sup>xviii</sup>	June	2008	India	
Unknown <sup>xix</sup>	June	2008	India	
Hetal Ravchaka <sup>xx</sup>	June	2008	India	
Sunita Singh <sup>xxi</sup>	May	2008	India	Jat Gotra (caste)
Jasbar Singh <sup>xxii</sup>	May	2008	India	Jat Gotra (caste)
Sonam <sup>xxiii</sup>	November	2008	India	
Pinky <sup>xxiv</sup>	November	2008	India	
Farzana <sup>xxv</sup>	November	2008	India	
Priyanka <sup>xxvi</sup>	October	2008	India	
Karan Sharma <sup>xxvii</sup>	October	2008	India	
Inderjot Kaur <sup>xxviii</sup>	February	2009	India	
8 unknown victims <sup>xxix</sup>	February	2009	India	
Rajwati <sup>xxx</sup>	February	2009	India	
Jaspal Haur <sup>xxxi</sup>	January	2009	India	
Harnam Singh <sup>xxxii</sup>	January	2009	India	
Balkar Singh <sup>xxxiii</sup>	January	2009	India	
Ravinder Pal Kauer <sup>xxxiv</sup>	January	2009	India	
Nejat <sup>xxxv</sup>	April	2007	Iran	
Farzaneh <sup>xxxvi</sup>	May	2008	Iran	
Rand Abdel-Qader <sup>xxxvii</sup>	April	2008	Iraq	Muslim
Leila Hussein <sup>xxxviii</sup>	June	2008	Iraq	Muslim
Shwbo Rauf Ali <sup>xxxix</sup>	May	2007	Iraq	Kurd
En'am Jabar Deifallah <sup>xl</sup>	August	2007	Israel/ Palestine	Palestinian
Hamda Abu Ghanem <sup>xli</sup>	January	2007	Israel/ Palestine	Arab
Nahed Hija <sup>xlii</sup>	July	2007	Israel/ Palestine	Palestinian

Suha Hija <sup>xliii</sup>	July	2007	Israel/ Palestine	Palestinian
Lina Hija <sup>xliv</sup>	July	2007	Israel/ Palestine	Palestinian
Unknown <sup>xlv</sup>	June	2008	Israel/ Palestine	Palestinian
Khoulood Mohaammad Al-Najjar <sup>xlvi</sup>	June	2008	Israel/ Palestine	Palestinian
Unknown <sup>xlvii</sup>	February	2009	Israel/ Palestine	Arab
Unknown <sup>xlviii</sup>	January	2009	Israel/ Palestine	Muslim, Arab
Unknown <sup>xlix</sup>	January	2009	Israel/ Palestine	Arab
Hina Saleem <sup>l</sup>	August	2006	Italy	Muslim
Unknown <sup>li</sup>	January	2007	Jordan	
Unknown <sup>lii</sup>	April	2009	Jordan	
Unknown <sup>liii</sup>	August	2008	Jordan	
Unknown <sup>liv</sup>	January	2008	Jordan	Palestinian
Unknown <sup>lv</sup>	July	2008	Jordan	
Unknown <sup>lvi</sup>	October	2008	Jordan	
Unknown <sup>lvii</sup>	October	2008	Jordan	
Unknown <sup>lviii</sup>	October	2008	Jordan	
Unknown <sup>lix</sup>	February	2009	Jordan	
Unknown <sup>lx</sup>	February	2009	Jordan	
Two unnamed teenagers <sup>lxi</sup>	January	2009	Jordan	
Unknown <sup>lxii</sup>	Unknown	2007	Morocco	
Banaz Bakir Fatah <sup>lxiii</sup>	July	2008	Norway	Muslim
Sumaira, Bibi, and Sama <sup>lxiv</sup>	July	2007	Pakistan	Hindu
Jamila <sup>lxv</sup>	July	2007	Pakistan	
Najma <sup>lxvi</sup>	July	2007	Pakistan	
Naseem Khatoon <sup>lxvii</sup>	July	2007	Pakistan	
Khateeja Khan <sup>lxviii</sup>	March	2007	Pakistan	
Waris Khan <sup>lxix</sup>	March	2007	Pakistan	
Unknown <sup>lxx</sup>	November	2007	Pakistan	
Samina <sup>lxxi</sup>	September	2007	Pakistan	
Rasheeda <sup>lxxii</sup>	Unknown	2007	Pakistan	
Askbar Pitafi <sup>lxxiii</sup>	Unknown	2007	Pakistan	

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Nasim Boota <sup>lxxxiv</sup>	April	2008	Pakistan	
Two Unknown Women <sup>lxxxv</sup>	April	2008	Pakistan	
Nazia Masih <sup>lxxxvi</sup>	August	2008	Pakistan	
Rizwana Bibi <sup>lxxxvii</sup>	December	2008	Pakistan	
Yasmeen <sup>lxxxviii</sup>	February	2008	Pakistan	
Sarah and Momal <sup>lxxxix</sup>	July	2008	Pakistan	
Saima, Sana, Nasir <sup>lxxx</sup>	July	2008	Pakistan	
5 Unknown Women <sup>lxxx1</sup>	July	2008	Pakistan	
Allah Dewaya <sup>lxxxii</sup>	March	2008	Pakistan	
Tasleem Solangi <sup>lxxxiii</sup>	October	2008	Pakistan	
Shehla Bibi <sup>lxxxiv</sup>	February	2009	Pakistan	
Quratul Ain <sup>lxxxv</sup>	February	2009	Pakistan	
Unknown <sup>lxxxvi</sup>	December	2008	Saudi Arabia	Saudi
Sahar <sup>lxxxvii</sup>	May	2007	Syria	
ZN <sup>lxxxviii</sup>	April	2008	Syria	
Unknown <sup>lxxxix</sup>	April	2008	Syria	
Zahra Al-Azzo <sup>xc</sup>	August	2008	Syria	
Khalidiya <sup>xc1</sup>	May	2008	Syria	
Esra Aksel <sup>xcii</sup>	December	2006	Turkey	
Two Unknown Women <sup>xciii</sup>	August	2007	Turkey	
Yasemin <sup>xciv</sup>	July	2007	Turkey	
Hulya Tas <sup>xcv</sup>	June	2007	Turkey	
Dilek A <sup>xcvi</sup>	January	2008	Turkey	
Admet Yildiz <sup>xcvii</sup>	July	2008	Turkey	
Naile Erdas <sup>xcviii</sup>	February	2009	Turkey	
Unknown <sup>xcix</sup>	November	2008	United Arab Emirates	
Lidia Motylska <sup>c</sup>	November	2008	United Kingdom	Victim: Catholic Perpetrator: Muslim
Sandeela Kanwal <sup>ci</sup>	July	2008	United States	Pakistani
Fauzia A. Mohammad <sup>cii</sup>	January	2009	United States	Muslim

See footnotes for appendix below

## Footnotes for Appendix

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