

EXPC 6005 – Gender and Peace Studies
FINAL ESSAY

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

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

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

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

² “Religion.” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 914-915.

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

²¹ Ibid, p. 386.

rights that are women's rights. A woman's right to autonomy over her own body is a right that perpetrators of honour killings do not recognise; a woman's body is considered the property of her husband or her male relatives. Due to the patriarchal nature of many religions and cultures, the woman's body is viewed negatively, thus causing societies to believe that a woman's body can and should be owned by men. The concept of ownership over a woman's body is not confined to Islam or Arab culture; it is also, perhaps more subtly, deeply anchored in several other cultures. In Christianity, the woman's body is also depicted as corrupt due to the temptation it evokes, whereas, the man's body is favourably looked upon since "male genitalia has validated men's status as sole representative of Christ".²² Moreover, there exist seemingly unobtrusive traditions in Western culture that reinforce the notion of a woman's body as property, for instance a man walking his daughter down the aisle on her wedding day to her husband-to-be. The father, who has been responsible for safeguarding his daughter's virginity, as symbolically represented by a white wedding dress, transfers his "ownership" over to his daughter's husband, who inherits the responsibility of ensuring his wife's social virginity. Furthermore, honour killings and honour-related violence violate a woman's right to equal protection under the law, as indicated in Article 3 (d) of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, a resolution that was adopted by the General Assembly in 1993.²³ The practice of murder in the name of honour also constitutes a grave barrier to women's access to justice as honour is articulated as a valid defence for murder in many Arab penal codes. This in itself is a complete disregard for Article 2 (c) of the United Nations

²² Kronendorfer, Björn. *Men's Bodies, Men's Gods: Male Identities in a (Post-) Christian Culture*. p. 4.

²³ United Nations. *A/RES/48/104: Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*.

Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, which protects women from physical, sexual, and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State.²⁴

There exists a plethora of elements within each culture and religion that conflict with the principle of women's rights, one of which is honour killing. In the interest of globalisation, which has led to an intensification of migration, efforts have been made on the parts of federal governments to embrace cultural and religious relativism and accept that there exist diverse practices that are not necessarily consistent with other practices. However, the manner in which "Western" governments have attempted to respect diversity has resulted in a "gender-blind multicultural discourse [which] means women remain invisible, locked into the private sphere where gender oppressive cultural and religious practices are still played out".²⁵ The mutual respect between cultures and religions is indisputably crucial to understanding differences and eventually breaking down barriers to peace; however, this cannot come at the cost of women's dignity. An emphasis has been put on understanding traditional values at an international level by the United Nations Human Rights Council, which adopted a resolution in 2009 seeking to "promote human rights and fundamental freedoms through a better understanding of *traditional* values of humankind".²⁶ Conversely, this resolution could potentially be regarded as a manner of legitimising the contravention of human rights, notably women's rights, through the argument of cultural traditions and customs. Moreover, resolutions as such encourage governments to abstain from interfering in minority lifestyles, which may practice certain forms of violence and oppression against women; this can result in "women being invisibilised, their needs ignored and

²⁴ United Nations. *A/RES/48/104: Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*.

²⁵ Meeto, V., and H. S. Mirza. "'There Is Nothing 'honourable' about Honour Killings": Gender, Violence and the Limits of Multiculturalism." p. 191.

²⁶ Epstein, Cynthia Fuchs. "Death by Gender." p. 56.

their voices silenced”.²⁷ The continuation of honour killings is directly correlated to patriarchal aspects of the cultures and religions in which they are practiced. Within certain cultures and religions, women are incessantly constructed as submissive and virginal beings, and yet, oxymoronically, they are simultaneously constructed as nurturing mother figures. This virgin/mother dichotomy is consistently embodied in cultural and religious practices, which continues the vicious cycle of the oppression of women. Yet, in adopting CEDAW, the international community has agreed that customary practices based on the inferiority of women or stereotyped gender roles of women should be eradicated. Article 5 of CEDAW states that:

States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.²⁸

We must learn to somehow strike a balance between upholding women’s rights and maintaining cultural and religious traditions which are of profound meaning to the communities that practice them. It is important to note that “within most religions there is a fundamentalist wing, advocating stronger gender distinctions and hierarchy, and a more liberal wing, advocating greater gender egalitarianism”.²⁹ And since religion and culture are amongst the most influential elements in shaping gender structures, it is crucial to begin working in conjunction with the liberal wings of religions that work to both embrace tradition, all while making the necessary changes to patriarchal systems in order to progress. In essence, a woman’s rights should never be ceded or negotiated for the purpose of upholding patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequalities.

²⁷ Beckett, Clare, and Marie Macey. “Race, Gender and Sexuality: The Oppression of Multiculturalism.” p. 311.

²⁸ United Nations. *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*.

²⁹ Wiesner-Hanks, Merry E. “Chapter Five: Religion.” *Gender in History: Global Perspectives*. p. 129.

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