

Honor Killings

Familial vengeance similar to that depicted in the *Oresteia* currently exists throughout the world in the form of “honor killings”. An honor killing is the homicide of a family member by other members of the family, due to the killers’ belief that the victim has shamed or dishonored the family or has violated the principles of their community or religion.

The most common reasons for such murders are the victim’s: refusing to enter an arranged marriage; being in a relationship that is disapproved of by the victim’s family; having sex outside marriage; being raped; dressing in a way that is deemed inappropriate; engaging in non-heterosexual relations; and renouncing the religious faith held by the family. The vast majority of honor killings are carried out by male family members against female family members.

A distinctive feature of honor killings is the collective nature of the murder - - often many members of an extended family plan the act together, sometimes through a formal “family council”. The family as a collective is presumed to have not only the right but the obligation to control individual family member’s behavior, especially if the family member is a woman and the behavior relates to sexuality or marriage. The primary motivation for controlling behavior, even to the extent of killing those who don’t “behave”, is to preserve the family’s reputation and avoid losing social status, especially in a tight-knit community. Because preservation of family honor and avoidance of family shame are shared community values, honor killings are normally seen as justified and the murderers can carry on their lives within the community free, not only from social stigma, but from criminal prosecution as well. In Pakistan, for example, no criminal charges will be filed against family members who participated in an honor killing, if they are forgiven by those male members of the family who did not participate.

Honor killings are most prevalent in cultures where honor is the central, predominant value. These are almost always paternalistic societies where men are sources, or active generators and agents of honor, while the only effect women can have on honor is to destroy it. The regime of honor is brutal and unforgiving - - once a woman is suspected of shameful behavior, she is doomed, even if innocent of the charge, since it is the perception of her conduct, not the reality, that is determinative. She will have no opportunity to defend herself and any protestations of innocence on her part will be pointless.

Although killing one’s wife or sister for tarnishing the family’s honor has not received approval from any respected Islamic scholar, either in the medieval or modern eras, and many Muslim commentators and organizations condemn honor killings as an un-Islamic cultural practice without a basis in the Qur’an, it is in Muslim communities that family honor is most highly valued and it is in Islamic South Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East that the vast majority of honor killings take place.

The U.N. estimates 5,000 honor killings are perpetrated every year, with 20% of those occurring in India, 20% in Pakistan and the remaining 60% in other Islamic areas of the world. Furthermore, since an unknown number of honor killings are classified as accidents or suicides, the actual number of such murders is likely to be substantially higher. In India, roughly an equal number of honor killings are carried out by Hindus and Muslims, with dating or marriage outside the victim's caste constituting the predominant reason for Hindus to murder female family members.

A significant number of Muslims living in western nations continue to adhere to the mores of their ancestors and honor killings have increased in recent years. In the UK, an estimated 12 honor killings are perpetrated annually. In the U.S., although statistics are kept on hate crimes (e.g., 18 hate-crime murders committed in 2015), none are kept on honor killings. The only study on the subject conducted to date has estimated that about 25 honor killings occur each year in the United States. However, the study's design has been criticized and, since collecting data on honor killings is part of the Trump administration's beleaguered travel ban, the subject is now highly politicized.