

# **So-called 'honour killings' are not a cultural phenomenon, but a crime against women, regardless of cultural background**

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As news of a missing Kurdish woman spread across the UK this week, with the Metropolitan police distributing missing persons leaflets and requests for help from Kurdish communities in London, the British media quickly picked up the story, and we hear increasing talk of another so called 'honour killing'. The reports have invariably included details of her family and ethnic background, and mention that the woman in question, Banaz Mahmod Babakir Agha, was a victim of forced marriage as well.

The term 'honour killing' is now widely used by the mainstream media to label this type of crime, where a female family member is murdered by a close male relative, supposedly in order to restore the family's 'honour'. Our purpose here is not to question the existence of these crimes, or diminish the problematic nature of extreme beliefs about gender which they express, but to raise the issue of the term 'honour killing' as one which diminishes the crimes involved by simply explaining them in religious terms.

There have certainly been several high profile cases of this kind in the UK in recent years, where women who engaged in 'unapproved' relationships with men have become murder victims at the hands of their relatives. An increasingly popular discourse around 'honour killing' within the media has followed these events, and generally becomes attached to a wider public debate about 'the Muslim world' and representations of Islam in the media. What such media portrayals fail to analyse is the worrying nature of gender relations and control of women's lives which these crimes indicate, and the prevalence of similar cases among white westerners.

By uncritically characterising 'honour killing' as a broad cultural phenomenon, such media portrayals diminish the crime itself, instead focussing on a problematic pattern supposedly endemic to certain parts of the world, usually with a vague suggestion that it is somehow connected to ideas in Islam itself. It is too easy to simply write such occurrences off as somehow linked to unexplained culturally or religiously determined ideas about 'honour', without ever discussing what lies behind such perceptions. The London based organisation Kurdish Women Against Honour Killing (KWAHK) reminds us that there is no such easy correlation with their slogan "no honour in murder".

However, when speaking about 'honour killing' generally, we must be more cautious about our understanding of the phenomenon, and critical of such portrayals of non-western cultures generally. Why not call these acts as they are? They are crimes against women and family life in both Kurdish and British society. This is neither something that is culturally prevalent or acceptable according to the mainstream of Kurdish communities. Nor can it be summarily attributed to beliefs which exist in Islam, for it is certainly not the case that all Muslims would justify such criminal behaviour. By emphasising such murders as a religious phenomenon, media portrayals simultaneously devalue the lives of the victims by ignoring the criminal nature of the murders, and perpetuate negative stereotypes about 'Middle Eastern' or 'Muslim' cultures in Britain by suggesting this is a feature inherent to such cultures.

Violence against women is a social phenomenon that, sadly, cuts across all cultural divides. If we look at the nature of crimes against women in British society generally, we have a case in point. With alarming regularity, white British women, like their Muslim counterparts, fall victim to violence and murder at the hands of controlling ex-partners whose jealousy drives them to such ends. Yet we do not typically refer to the fact that the women involved were Christian, or Australian, or give other details of their biographies. We do not term such crimes 'jealousy killings', or try to diminish the lives of the victims by reducing the crimes to cultural beliefs, although we may be all too aware of the problematic attitudes towards gender which prevail in our society generally.

It is certainly fair to say that conflict over women's rights expresses itself differently according to cultural variations, but the parallels which exist between incidents of this kind in Muslim and non-Muslim communities should be apparent. As critical media consumers and responsible citizens, we see a need to better understand the issues which lie beneath such violent acts before simply labelling them according to a popular rhetoric, the commonalities as well as differences across cultures, and work together – men, women, Kurdish, Christian, British, Muslim - to stop these crimes, to develop a more open dialogue about gender equality in all societies, and to support immigrants who face the difficult and sometimes traumatic challenge of adapting to a new culture and values.