

Murder with Impunity:

The Construction of Arab Masculinities and Honor Crimes

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Introduction

Violence against women (VAW) continues to exist as a pervasive, structural, systematic, and institutionalized violation of women's basic human rights (UN Division of Advancement for Women, 2006). It cuts across the boundaries of age, race, class, education, and religion which affect women of all ages and all backgrounds in every corner of the world. Such violence is used to control and subjugate women by instilling a sense of insecurity that keeps them "bound to the home, economically exploited and socially suppressed" (Mathu, 2008, p. 65). It is estimated that one out of every five women worldwide will be abused during her lifetime with rates reaching up to 70 percent in some countries (WHO, 2005). Whether this abuse is perpetrated by the state and its agents, by family members, or even by strangers, VAW is closely related to the regulation of sexuality in a gender specific (patriarchal) manner.¹ This regulation is, on the one hand, maintained through the implementation of strict cultural, communal, and religious norms, and on the other hand, through particular legal measures that sustain these norms. Therefore, religious institutions, the media, the family/tribe, cultural networks, and the legal system continually discipline women's sexuality and punish those women (and in some instances men) who have transgressed or allegedly contravened the social boundaries of 'appropriateness' as delineated by each society. Such women/men may include lesbians/gays, women who appear 'too masculine' or men who appear 'too feminine,' women who try to exercise their rights freely or men who do not assert their rights as 'real men' should, women/men who have been sexually assaulted or raped, and women/men who challenge male/older male authority.

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1. For the purpose of this study I have decided to rely on Kapasula's definition which states that patriarchy is the "male supremacy principle that is anchored in and propelled by the polarization of the sex, denial of transgendered and homosexual identities and defining man as more powerful, successful and braver than women" (Kapasula, 2010, p. 29).

This research, which builds on a Masters Degree investigative study that was previously conducted by the author at the University of Oxford, explores the role that young Arab men play both as the perpetrators of violence as well as the victims of violence within their communities and families. It pulls from the shadows the silent epidemic of social and structural violence against young men, in hopes of demonstrating how honour crimes in the Middle East are far more complicated than they initially appear to be. It is beyond the scope of this study, however, to delve into questions pertaining to the formation of the Arab judiciary system, or to examine the cultural, religious, or institutional justifications for honor crimes. Instead, this research engages in an analysis of the personal motives that compel young Arab men to commit crimes in the name of so-called honor. It also explores how this particular form of murder is a spectacle performed by young men to publically (re)assert and prove their masculinity to others.

Defining Honour: *Sharaf* and '*Ard*

In most Middle Eastern countries, “the ideal of masculinity is underpinned by the notion of ‘honour’- of an individual man, or a family or community - and is fundamentally connected to policing female behaviour and sexuality” (Coomaraswamy, 2005, p. xii-1). According to Spierenberg (1998), the concept of honor has three distinct layers: the first layer refers to a person’s own feeling of self-worth, the second denotes their assessment of their worth in the eyes of others, and the third layer relates to the actual opinion of others about them. Thus, the criteria of judgment depend on the socio-cultural context of the community in question. As a result, identifying the different standards of honor and masculinity is in fact a cross-cultural enterprise (Spierenberg, 1998).

The term ‘honor’ in Arabic distinguishes between two variants: *sharaf* and '*ard* or '*ird*.² The first variant (*sharaf*) refers to the more general honor of a social unit or collectivity such as a tribe, clan, caste or family (Ali, 2008). It is a term that applies to men and is attained through the maintenance of their family’s reputation, hospitality, generosity, chivalry, bravery, piety, and sometimes nobility or political power (Nesheiwat, 2004). As noted by Abou Zaid (1966), it [*sharaf*] implies a “highness both in physical position and in social standing” (p. 245). Yet, since the latter qualities are not static but rather unfold continuously and actively depending on the behavior of others, it is considered to be an acquired value and can thus be augmented, regained, diminished, or lost according to the family’s ‘moral behavior’ (Warrick, 2005). In this sense, *sharaf* is the equivalent of the Western concept of honor/dignity.

However, the second variant ('*ard*) is a more specific form of family honor that derives its value from the chastity and purity of its female members. Unlike *sharaf* it is considered to be an ascribed value that can only be lost. As Dodd explains, “‘*ird* can only be lost by the misconduct of the woman. And once lost, it cannot be regained” except by shedding the blood of the female member who dishonored and shamed her family (Dodd, 1973, p. 42). This misconduct encompasses any form of sexual or social behavior that does not conform to the acceptable sexual/social codes or standards of ‘normalcy’ as specified by the family, tribe, or community (Awwad, 2002). For example, women who (un)willingly engage in sexual relations that result in the loss of their virginity or pregnancy, or those who socialize with males outside their immediate family whether by talking, flirting, or holding hands, risk being punished by their fathers, brothers, or uncles (Nesheiwat, 2004). Such punishment usually takes the form of murder which is considered to be the only method that can effectively restore/cleanse the family’s collective honor. In simpler terms, an act of violence committed by the male members of a family/tribe against their female relatives (women related by a blood tie up to the fourth degree – such as mothers, sisters, daughters, paternal nieces or paternal or maternal cousins), with the pretext of protecting their *sharaf*, is referred to as an Honor Crime (Nesheiwat, 2004). While crimes committed in the name of honor are at the furthest end of a continuum of abusive, violent, and unjust behavior against women, one has to recognize that other forms of gendered-violence such as acid attacks, rape and gang rapes, flogging, and forced suicides, also constitute part of that continuum.

2. The word '*ird* is a simplified transcription of the term 'honor' as it appears in literary Arabic. '*Ard*, on the other hand, is the dialectal form - as used in Jordan - of the same exact term.

Paradoxically, intra and/or inter familial sexual assault such as incestual rape, is considered to be a form of sexual ‘transgression’ committed by the victim(s) that also

results in tainting the collective honor of the family (Fisk, 2010). In such cases men are almost always presumed to be innocent—i.e. the woman must have tempted the perpetrator into raping her or enticed him into having an affair. In this context, one can argue that the *sharaf* of the Arab man depends almost entirely on the *'ird* of the women in his family; or as the late Patai puts it, “the core of the *sharaf* is clearly the protection of one’s family relative’s *ird*” (Patai, 1973, p. 120). Indeed, women and in specific their hymens are transformed into mere symbols that shape and construct the social profile of the ‘pure’ and ‘honorable’ Arab family, and as such should be protected using whatever methods necessary (Araji & Carlson, 2001).

Virginity and the Hymen

Codes of honor and shame are associated on a very basic level with virginity and the hymen (Abdul-Salam 2001, p. 590). The physical intactness of the hymen has an intrinsic value in honor-based societies, in that it literally determines the level of honorability (*'ird*) that a woman possesses (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2002). Abu-Odeh (1996) writes that “Arab women, according to the ideal model, are expected to abstain from any kind of sexual practice before they get married. The hymen in this context becomes the socio-physical sign that both assures and guarantees virginity and gives women a stamp of respectability and virtue” (p. 149). This ‘stamp of respectability’ is extended to the male members of the female’s family owing to the fact that a woman’s virginity (i.e. the physical intactness of her hymen) provides “proof that the merchandise is brand new” (Accad, 2008). González-López is in clear agreement with the previous statement seeing that women with an intact hymen symbolize “sexual purity, honour and decency” while women with a ruptured hymen represent “dishonour, profanation, and lack of virtue” (González-López, 1998, p. 3). By this way of parsing the concept of virginity, the hymen is translated into a ‘bipolar paradigm’ (intact/ruptured, open/closed, whore/virgin, polluted/pure, active/passive, bad/good, shame/honor) that orders women’s sexuality from a social (male) point of view (González-López, 1998).

Building on this perspective, one can argue that the hymen has but one ontological dimension: it exists as a “colonized terrain of heterosexual patriarchy” (Currie and Raoul, 2004, p. 136) upon which societal, political, and cultural ideologies are being fought out. Therefore, “requiring virginity in women as a regulatory practice of gender exceeds the physical/biological body and is reproduced onto the gender political body” (Baker, 2009, p. 6). This gendered political body is configured when:

. . . the hymen becomes displaced from its biological vessel, the vagina, onto the body as a whole, “hymenizing” it and producing it as a body called female. But then it is displaced again onto the social space where the female body is allowed to move/be, encircling it as a social hymen that delimits its borders. (Abu-Odeh, 2000, p. 371)

Hymenizing the body, or, as Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2002, p. 580) refers to it, “the process of hymenization,” results in constructing an intimate space whereby the female body is allowed to move and be. This intimate space, which is essentially created for the ‘protection’ of Arab women’s honor, is encircled by the boundaries and borders of the social space of their fathers, brothers, uncles, and husbands.³ Now, owing to the

3. It is within this social space that the patriarchal framework that structures the behavior, the discursive practices, norms, and values of the group and/or community are created.

fact that most Arab women are permitted to socialize with male members within their immediate family, one can argue that the intimate space to which women are confined in fact expands to include the social space of their male relatives and/or siblings. In simpler terms, an Arab woman is allowed to 'cross over' or transgress the borders of her intimate space into the (male) social space only if the latter is occupied by men related to her. Consequently, an honor crime transpires when women and/or girls cross the borders of their intimate space into the social space of other unrelated males. This 'crossing over' or transgression of space by the female member(s) is deemed to be a direct challenge to the male authority figures and collective honor of her family. As a result, the latter find themselves 'forced' to defend their honor by 'eliminating' the challenger (woman) from that space – an elimination that calls for the total eradication of this challenger (Malina, 1993). When analyzed in such a manner, it becomes evident that the hymenization process clearly serves to legitimize acts of violence perpetrated against the bodies and lives of women who do not conform to the aforementioned boundaries. Shalhoub-Kevorkian does in fact point this out by stating that:

. . . the 'hymenization' of women's sexual, physical and social life has been translated in some instances into legitimizing acts of violence against women, turning these acts into 'protective' behavior rather than criminal actions. Although legal codes label such behavior as crimes, it is the female victims who are invariably blamed for the abuse of these strictures and who are often killed as a result (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2002, p. 580).

This 'protective behavior' that Shalhoub-Kevorkian discusses entails 'disciplining' the female body by controlling, repressing, surveying, and regulating its sexual behavior.⁴

Dynamics of Surveillance

The task of supervising Arab women requires the constant surveillance of their every move by their kin as well as by their neighbors. Thus, surveillance is translated into yet another form of disciplinary power that enables the continuous and pervasive control of Arab women's individual behavior and conduct (Smart, 1985). However, in order for the disciplinary power of surveillance to be effective, the subject – in this case women – rather than physical force (power), should be visible. By putting subjects in a state of constant visibility, the efficiency of the patriarchal structure in society is maximized, owing to the fact that the constant (invisible) surveillance induces a sense of permanent visibility that ensures the functioning of power, even when no one is actually asserting it (Foucault, 1979).

Consequently, the disciplinary power of surveillance – which is initially directed toward disciplining the body – starts to take hold of the mind and induces a psychological state of conscious and permanent visibility (Foucault, 1977). In other words, perpetual surveillance is internalized by individuals to produce the kind of self-regulation that defines the subject and forces them to adhere to society's patriarchal norms. When applying this analysis to honor crimes, one can argue that the relationship between the visibility of subjects (potential victims) and invisibility of surveillance (perpetrator's gaze) is a fundamental feature that polices women's bodies and/or sexualities even when, they are not being supervised (Dovey, 1999). For instance, given that various Arab women find themselves being watched and observed without knowing who, when or how they are being seen, they have no other

4. I use the term 'regulating' to refer not only to the act of restricting sexual behavior, but also to the act of categorizing and describing it. By defining 'regulation' in this manner one is capable of demonstrating how the latter word functions to classify and organize behavior along the 'normal' versus 'deviant' binary.

alternative than to assume an unwavering surveillance, and hence internalise the 'normalizing regimes' of sexual conduct or risk being murdered.⁵

Myths, Stories, and Honor Crimes

Essential to the comprehension of how the murder of women can be validated rests in seeing the minds of the perpetrators as interconnected with the stories/myths they are told in development, and the stories they tell themselves. For example, in Pakistan, 'honor killing' is called 'karo kari,' literally the "blackened man, blackened woman" (Jafri, 2008, p. 4). Such a phrase speaks profoundly of the justification found in Pakistan for men who commit violent crimes against women; the label "karo kari" itself invokes the perspective underlying conduct as one in which the honor of a man is tied to that of a woman. If a man is "blackened", behind his "blackening" may rest a woman whose own actions negatively impacted (or seems to have negatively impacted) the man. The "blackened" female is thus viewed as requiring removal. This imagery of 'removing', 'chopping off', 'cleansing', 'blackness', 'woodworm' are all labels that relate in one way or another to illness or death, and thus their constant repetition through language reinforces everyday feelings, reactions, and practices that justify femicide. In this sense, one can argue that honor crimes are in essence being justified on the basis of supported 'myths/stories' that emphasize two interdependent dimensions of honor crimes, namely the symbolic and structural dimensions. The symbolic dimension refers to the meanings used to represent Arab women's sexualities. For example, via the 'woodworm' representation, Arab women's sexualities are seen as ill, dirty, negative, harmful, and sick. In contrast, the structural dimension shapes and organizes social structures to reproduce laws and social customs that sympathize with the perpetrators. In simpler terms, the structural dimension exploits the symbolic dimension (images) to shape, organize, and (re)produce social structures "through the explicit language of the legal code or by the tacit approval of the State" (Nesheiwat, 2004, p. 253). For when a nation-state condones honor crimes by accepting the 'protection of honor' as a legitimate defense and as a result grants the perpetrator a lesser sentence for 'vanquishing a societal ill,' it is clearly reinforcing and maintaining a social practice based on the mythologized cultural notions pertaining to "identity, honour, gender, power, and masculinity" (Jafri, 2008, p. 140).

Therefore, rather than seeing men who kill in the name of so-called honor merely as murderers, one has to understand the cultural, societal, and legislative forces that "virtually blackmail" (Husseini, 2009, p. 14) men into committing the crime - forces that possibly consist of both the fear of absence of action, and feelings of heroic duty to action.

Understanding the Impact of Structural and Social Violence against Men

Traditional definitions of Arab masculinity (*rujulah*) implicitly and explicitly normalize certain forms of social and structural violence that prevent men from expressing and experiencing their sexuality and identity freely. Such normalized acts of oppression, which may or may not take place outside the conscious awareness of individuals who constitute part of the key institutions within society (including the family structure, the community, and the medical and legal systems), are intended to define, control, and enforce certain beliefs, customs, and practices that sustain the dominant form of masculinity. As Kimmel (2008) states: "[G]uys hear the voices of the men in their lives - fathers, coaches, brothers, grandfathers, uncles, priests - to inform their ideas of masculinity" (p. 47).

5. Normalizing regimes act negatively by stigmatizing certain behaviors and conducts that defy oppressive social norms.

However, what often gets lost in translation is the fact that this social and structural violence against young Arab men leaves them disconnected from a range of emotions that they are prohibited from experiencing and are thus forced to suppress (Kimmel, 2008). Stated differently, from a young age boys are taught that in order to be 'real men' they must take on a tough guise. This guise allows them to show only certain parts of themselves and their identities that the dominant culture has defined as manly: these include risk-taking, self-discipline, physical toughness and/or muscular development, aggression, violence, emotional control or emotional reservation, and overt heterosexual desire (Jhally, 1999). Hence, men construct an image of themselves on the basis of what society and other men 'expect' of them, rendering the construction of Arab masculinity a "homosocial experience: performed for, and judged by, other men" (Kimmel, 2008, p. 47). Accordingly, one can argue that as these young men grow older and begin to perpetrate acts of violence against women, they do so because they have been socialized to believe that violence is the only acceptable 'manly' form of emotional expression (Kimmel, 2008).

Based on this conceptualization, honor crimes essentially become mediums used to displace feelings of humiliation and shame, whilst enabling young men to prove and/or restore their 'lost' manhood publically (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004). This public assertion of masculinity through murder is a silent message that reflects well on both the individual committing the crime and on the group to which the individual belongs to. As Messerschmidt explains, "in situations where men commit homicide, murder can be a process of affirming masculinity" (Messerschmidt, 2004, p. 388). As a result, the death of the female in cases of honor crimes confers a level of status, power, and manliness that diminishes the intensity of shame and replaces it "as far as possible with its opposite, pride, thus preventing the individual from being overwhelmed by the feeling of shame" (as quoted in Kimmel, 2008, p. 56). In short, the indirect structural and social oppression of young Arab men by societal and legal institutions may evolve into direct forms of oppression when these individuals feel that their masculinity is in question (Chakrapani, Newman, Shunmugam, McLuckie, & Melwin, 2007).

Between Boyhood and Manhood

According to Peteet,

Arab masculinity (*rujulah*) is acquired, verified and played out in the brave deed, in risk-taking, and in expressions of fearlessness and assertiveness. It is attained by constant vigilance and willingness to save face and defend honor (*sharaf*), kin and community from external aggression, and to uphold and protect cultural definitions of gender-specific propriety. Since elaborate, well-defined rites of passage to mark transitions from boyhood to adolescence to manhood are difficult to discern, a loose set of rites marking the route to "manhood" must be accompanied by performative deeds to convince and win public approval. (Peteet, 2002, p. 321)

Peteet's argument is significant to the discussion of 'identity' because it provides us with yet another possible explanation as to why the perpetrators of honor crimes are relatively young; right at the border between boyhood and manhood. The most common argument that has been presented to explain this trend stipulates that families often assign sons under the age of 18 to commit honor killings. Since these individuals are legally minors, they are tried according to juvenile laws, convicted as minors, serve time in a juvenile detention center, and are then released with a clean criminal record.

Such course of action encourages families to choose young men to commit the murder (Cuomo, Adams & Richardson, 2000; Natan, 2006; Country Reports on Human Rights Practices by the Department of State for 2007, 2008; Clark, Clark & Adamec, 2007). While this argument is clearly valid, it ignores the fact that many boys and young men in the Middle East construct their masculine identity around the axis of honor. In other words, the aforementioned explanation does not take into account how the concept of honor is employed by boys and young men to reinvent notions of masculinity in the shadow of decreasing prospects of establishing themselves as 'real men.'

Emasculating Pressure

Out of the ninety-nine reported cases of honor crimes in Jordan over a period of nine years, 43.4 percent of the perpetrators were 24 years old or younger.⁶ Since most Arab males who fall within this age range are financially dependent on their fathers, given that they might be unemployed or recent graduates, they are forced to conform to the "authority from above" (Connell, 1995, p. 18). This essentially means that young males living with their parents are still under the control of their fathers, grandfathers, or older uncles. In *Modernizing Women, Gender and Social Change in the Middle East*, Moghadam (1993, p. 104) states that "senior men of the family have authority over everyone else in the family, who are in turn subject to forms of control and subordination". This subordination can be perceived by young men as a direct attack on their masculinity and/or manhood and in turn evokes feelings of emasculation and powerlessness. Consequently, these men act out their feelings of powerlessness on women (or children) who are in positions of even less power and authority, as a way to compensate for their underlying feelings of 'inadequacy.' As Hunnicutt (2009, p. 559) explains, "it is actually the least powerful men who victimize women under social pressure to accrue more power and redeem their 'wounded masculinity.'" As he continues, "[M]en use violence to maintain their advantage in the most disadvantaged situations. The more disenfranchised men are from positions of legitimate dominance, the more they may use violence to reinforce quite possibly the only position of domination available to them" (Hunnicutt, 2009, p. 260). Klein reiterates the latter argument when writing that "[M]ale physical power over women, or the illusion of power, is nonetheless a minimal compensation for the lack of power over the rest of one's life. Some men resort to rape and other personal violence against the only target accessible, the only ones with even less autonomy" (Klein, 1981, p. 72).

When analyzed in this manner, one can convincingly argue that the overwhelming percentage of young males convicted of honor crimes is due to the fact that such crimes project a sense of masculine value or even a "re-balancing of the cosmos" (Jafri, 2008, p. 10). In other words, young men conceive of honor crimes as a master opportunity to transform their 'subordinated masculinity' into a 'hegemonic masculinity,' and thus feed into the normative definition of what it means to be a man among men. Such "re-balancing" arguably becomes more internal than external; killing restores young men's sense of worth and masculinity, as opposed to restoring the family's collective honor. Over time, reproductions of validation for this 'restoration' further build the case for the crime's worth, even if the 'worth' is more quantifiable in the imagined than the real. These reproductions that are also institutionalized in the criminal justice system through laws, legal practices, and procedures that blatantly discriminate against women.

6. These statistics are adapted from a study conducted by the King Hussein Information and Research Center. The study analyzed 99 cases of honor crimes with the purpose of bringing to light the economic underpinnings of honor crimes in Jordan. This comprehensive study is available to anyone interested and can be accessed at <http://mathlouma.com/en/resources>.

Conclusion

The changing role of Arab women destabilizes the social structures within the private and public spheres and in turn releases periodic private violence in hopes of taming the “emergent sexual types and practices” (Faqr, 2000, p. 76). Apprehension to this rapid change is projected, in various Middle Eastern countries, through the enactment of femicide. In this article, I have attempted to demonstrate how the murder of women in the name of ‘honor’ is clearly a gender-specific form of discrimination and violence. However, it would be inaccurate to conceive of it as simply a gender issue or an individual aberration. Honor crimes are the tip of the iceberg and the symptom of a wider crisis of masculinity and socio-economic disadvantage. These crimes should be understood as symptomatic of the perceived failure, by young Arab males, of living up to a gendered standard of a ‘real’ masculine identity. And as demonstrated in this study, this failure can be devastating enough to generate the unimaginable rage that it takes to kill another human being.

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