

# Crimes of Honor

By Rana Husseini, Journalist and Human Rights Activist

AMMAN - Amneh begged her brother: "Take good care of my mother", before he shot her to death in an Amman suburb for getting pregnant out of wedlock. But Amneh's mother supports her 19-year-old son's crime, saying "my daughter made a mistake and should bear the consequences." "I am calm about her death, but I am worried about my son and the kind of punishment he might get, but they tell me that he will get a reduced sentence and will be released soon," she says.

Amneh, 21, was shot four times in the stomach by her brother, who is now on trial. "I knew she was going to die. She deserved to die. She destroyed our family, our honour and did not think of us or her family's fate when she did it," said her 16-year-old sister. "But sometimes I miss her and feel bad about her death. I wish they had married her off to the man she had a relationship with, instead of killing her," said her sister. Amneh was one of 17 women reportedly killed in the Kingdom in the name of honor in 1999.

The story is the same from year to year, and in all cases of honor killings, the victims are women. Investigations and courts proceedings indicate that most of these crimes are committed to cover up other crimes, or to "solve" other family conflicts such as inheritance disputes or financial crises. Others are victims of rumors, suspicion or rape. Such was the case of 16-year-old Kifaya, a school girl who was killed in May 1994 by her brother because she was raped by another brother.

Her brother Khalid, 37, served six years for slitting his sister's throat after asking her to recite verses from the Koran. "I had to kill her to preserve the family's honor," says Khalid, a father of four. "Society imposes these rules on us, and I did it to please society." His sibling's only "mistake" was being raped by

her 21-year-old brother. She became pregnant, and survived an attempted murder by her rapist. Her family later married her to a man 50 years her senior, who eventually divorced her. The night Kifaya was divorced, she was killed. Her own family, who plotted the murder, blamed her for the rape and accused her of "seducing her brother." "If I go back in time, I would not kill my sister...I would lock her in the house until she either died or someone married her...I have wasted enough time of my life in prison," Khalid says.

Religious leaders such as Sheikh Izzedin Al Khatib Al Tamimi, His Majesty King Abdullah's advisor on Islamic Affairs, says that a man who kills a female relative is breaking Sharia. "Before a person is punished for adultery, four people must witness an act of adultery, and even when a transgression has occurred, Islam does not permit an individual to take the law into his own hands, but instead calls on the people to refer the case to the ruler or the law," says Sheikh Tamimi. But the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, takes a different position.

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Recently, the IAF criticised a national drive to scrap Article 340 of the Penal Code, which promises to reduce or eliminate punishments for men who claim "honor" as their motivation for murdering a female relative. "This is a Western plot to destroy and corrupt our society. They (the West) have occupied us militarily and politically, and now they want to destroy society, which is the last remaining fortress," says IAF Secretary General Abdul Latif Arabiyat.

Over 5,000 people, led by Their Royal Highnesses Prince Ali and Prince Ghazi, demonstrated in front of Parliament and Prime Ministry on February 14 to protest against so-called "crimes of honor" and demand that Article 340 be removed from the Penal Code. Arabiyat, a former



deputy and speaker of the House from 1989 to 1993, claims the campaign to throw out Article 340 is misleading, since crimes committed in the name of honor are not dealt with in courts under that specific article. "Article 340 upholds our social values, and abolishing it means abolishing the last line of defence for our morals," adds Arabiyat, who was secretary general at the Ministry of Education in the 1980s. He says the IAF has issued a fatwa (Islamic edict) in support of Article 340. "We do not believe in killing women, but if a man surprises his wife while she is committing adultery and kills her, then he should benefit from a reduced punishment," he said. "If *Sharia* was implemented we would not see any of these crimes," adds the IAF leader.

One week before the end of the most recent ordinary session of Parliament, a petition signed by 55 deputies was presented to the Permanent Office calling for the implementation of *Sharia* in Jordanian legislation. But several deputies later withdrew their signature on the grounds

that the petition was "misinterpreted" by the media. In addition, several deputies accused Deputy Mohammad Bani Hani, who prepared the petition, of adding more text to the letter after they had signed it. Some of the deputies said the petition was an indirect protest against criticism levelled against the

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Lower House for refusing to throw out Article 340. Islamist Deputy Abdullah Akayleh said deputies were specifically indignant about the demonstration. Deputy Mahmoud Kharabsheh, a leading opponent of the anti-340 campaign who collected signatures in Parliament to defeat a move to scrap the article, says the article is a "preventive method to control society." "We are not against women's rights, but the existence of such a law is a factor to preserve them and preserve society from moral deterioration."

But campaigners insisted that this article and so-called crimes of honor violate the basic human rights of women, as well as their right to life. "Our fight against this article is clear," says Basel Burqan, a member of the National Committee to Eliminate the so-called Honor Crimes. "This article discriminates against women, violates the *Sharia* and the Constitution and does not allow women a fair trial," he says. The committee, which in August 1999 began collecting signatures to support abolishing the article, has called for the cancellation of Article 340 and other articles that discriminate against women. The committee managed

to collect more than 15,000 signatures over a four-month period.

The Jordanian National Commission for Women, chaired by HRH Princess Basma, was the first to suggest the cancellation of the article in a draft bill that was presented to the government in 1998. "I am going to vote in favour of the cancellation of Article 340 in the coming joint session," said Deputy Abdullah Jazi, who represents the southern Ma'an Governorate. Jazi says many deputies have become aware of the average Jordanian's increased consciousness of the article, and of the public's desire to see it abolished. "Deputies will think it over now, because many feel that their popular bases are in favour of the cancellation," says the parliamentarian.

The late King Hussein and Her Majesty Queen Noor began a campaign against so-called "honor crimes," several years ago describing them as foreign to Islam. Moreover, his Majesty King Abdullah and Her Majesty Queen Rania have stepped up the drive: "It is an issue we have to reflect upon, and we realise that something has to be changed ... The government and the officials are doing their utmost to discourage this practice," Queen Rania told a French television station in 1999. Tribal leaders, who have also realised the need for change, joined the February march and demonstration against Article 340. "During the past 40 years, I have never heard of an honor crime occurring in Jordanian tribes," said Sheikh Mit'eb Fayeze. "Instead, tribes cherished women and granted them full rights to become active individuals in their community," he added.

Tribal and religious Judge Mohammed Abu Sheikh says that the tribal and religious rulings are strict in cases of adultery and are not "subject to the moods, mentalities or beliefs of individuals." "In our religion and tradition, there must be four witnesses, of outstanding reputation, to an act of adultery, and it is the tribal judge that decides the punishment not the individual," says Abu Sheikh. "The problem with these crimes is that some people take what they want from religion and leave out what they do not want ... Religion should not be applied according to one's mood," he says. He maintained that tribes also try to ensure that a woman is not falsely accused. "If a woman is falsely accused, then the person who accused her will have to take three tribal delegations (*jaha*) to three different distinguished tribal leaders to cleanse the girl's reputation and honor," he said. He stressed that even if a case of adultery is proven among tribes, "which is rare," then the tribal leaders work to solve the problem by covering it up and marrying the two, or by finding other solutions in order to stop the story from spreading."

For social worker Ina'am Asha, who deals directly with "honour crimes," and with women as victims who have been taken into protective custody to save them from such



crimes, “these kinds of killings will only make things worse for the families.” “These families think that when they kill, the problem will end ... On the contrary, it is the beginning of their never ending problems,” says the social worker. “Killing will destroy the family, and all neighbours and relatives will never forget the incident.”

University of Jordan’s sociology professor Sari Nasir confirmed Asha’s theory, adding that these crimes are deeply rooted in the society and result from ancient unjust practices against women: “This problem is deeply implanted in the society...Its history goes back to the *Jahilyyah* (pre-Islamic) days, when female [infants] were buried alive,” says Nasir. With the dawn of Islam, women were granted some rights, says Nasir, but tradition, customs and social mores have remained strong, leading many individuals to interpret *Sharia* according to their beliefs and traditions. The family is considered to be the basic unit of the society, he says, “and if one of its parts is affected, then the rest of the parts are affected as well ... Therefore that part should be punished.” “From this, we can see that women’s conduct is controlled and monitored, because they are considered the ones who bring shame to the family,” says Nasir. He asserts that financial burdens play a part in the increase of “honor crimes,” particularly that the crimes happen mainly among society’s poor, unemployed and uneducated members.

In addition to legislation and social mores that discriminate against women in so-called crimes of honor, women who survive such murder attempts face a life in the protective custody of prison, since they have nowhere else to go. At any given time there are 40-50 women in protective custody at the government’s correctional facility. These women, who range in age from 15 to 30, stay indefinitely. Either they can accept marriage proposals from men who visit these prisons looking for wives, or they are eventually released. Most of the time they end up murdered after leaving prison. “These women tell me they are already dead inside prison ... They are frustrated since they have been forgotten by society and are left with no hopes and dreams. They do not know when they will be released. They know that if they are released, they will be killed,” says Asha ... On the day of her release, Jasmin, 16, was shot to death by her 29-year-old brother Sarhan as she walked into her house in an Amman suburb, even after her father signed a JD5,000 guarantee that he would not harm her. Jasmin was raped by a close relative, says Sarhan, who spent six months in prison for murder. “She did something wrong and she deserves to die ... If I had not killed her, I would have killed a 1,000 from my tribe. Our society does not have mercy,” he says. “If I hadn’t killed her, people would have looked down on me,” he explains. “Once she is raped, she is no longer a girl. My only alternative was to kill her. Death is the only way to obliterate shame.” Sarhan said he acted with the support of his father, mother, uncles and other family members:

“They all met and assigned the task of killing her to me. After killing her, my family and relatives visited me in prison and congratulated me,” says Sarhan. “I consider myself a victim, a victim who was forced to kill his sister whom he grew up with and loved.” Nasir says that changing laws like Article 340 is only part of a comprehensive process. Legislative reform must also be accompanied by an effort to educate people and raise their awareness of the situation, he adds. “The media should take responsibility of tackling this issue and delivering the truth to the people, by explaining to them that this is a backward behavior and a crime that is inflicted only on women,” says Nasir.

Source: Index on Censorship, 3/1996  
Credit: Russian PEN/P. Shop

