

Human rights violations against women

[Sociology](#), [Human Rights](#)



Human rights violations against women have, for too long, been denied the attention and concern of international organizations, national governments, traditional human rights groups and the press. Meanwhile, hundreds of millions of girls and women around the world continue to endure debilitating and often fatal human rights abuses. These are only a few instances of abuse which occur every single day all around the world. Human rights violations against women must be documented, publicized and stopped.

? Brazil: A man who confessed to stabbing his wife and her lover to death is for the second time acquitted of murder by an all-male jury. The acquittal is based on the argument that he acted in legitimate defense of his wronged honor.

? India: A 10-year-old girl is rescued by a flight attendant who noticed her crying. Her father has sold her to the 60-year-old man sitting next to her for the equivalent of \$240US.

? Ireland: A 14-year-old girl, raped by her best friend's father, learns she is pregnant. She is prohibited from travelling to England where abortion is legal. Only when she indicates she will commit suicide if forced to carry the pregnancy to term does the Supreme Court allow her to proceed.

? Kenya: At a boarding school, 300 boys attack the girls' dormitory. Seventy-one girls are raped. Nineteen are trampled to death in the stampede to escape. The school's vice principal remarks, The boys never meant any harm against the girls. They just wanted to rape.

? United States: A 51-year-old woman is stabbed 19 times and killed by her former boyfriend as she waits inside a courthouse to extend an order of protection. Twice before he had been charged with harassment. Both times the charges were dropped by the courts. (www. equalitynow. com)

One of the most horrific acts of abuse towards women is known as honor killings. In various countries throughout the world, particularly in the Middle East and parts of South Asia, women who bring dishonor to their families because of sexual indiscretions or even rape are forced to pay a terrible price at the hands of male family members. This brutal act is most commonly found among the Islamic cultures. They use their religion as an excuse for their animalistic, indecent behavior. However, Islam recognizes and celebrates the inherent dignity bestowed by God upon all human beings regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or religion. The Koran, the Muslim holy book, is explicit in its emphasis on the equality of women and men before God. And their Lord has accepted of them and answered them, Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you, whether male or female, you are members, one of another (Koran, 3: 195)

In the Arab culture, family status is largely dependent upon its honor, much of which is determined by the respectability of its daughters, who can damage it irreparably by the perceived misuse of their sexuality. Examples cited by women's organizations (MLW. com) show that women are punished, even murdered, on the suspicion of having been involved in a sexual relationship. Victims of rape have met the same fate. Maintaining honor is deemed a woman's responsibility, whether or not she has been educated about sex or consented to the act.

According to Sharif Kanaana, professor of anthropology at Birzeit University in Palestine, the code of honor killings prevents women from having sexual freedom or the right to use their sexual powers the way they want. (Kanaana 44) The honor of a family is very dependent on a woman's virginity. In the Arab culture, it is believed that a woman's virginity is the property of the men around her, first her father, and later a gift to her husband. In this context, a woman's honor must be guarded by a community of male family members to assure she does not infect it, or the family name. The woman is guarded externally by her behavior and dress code and internally by keeping her hymen intact. Should the woman tarnish the family name in any way, whether it be through sexual relations with another man on her own accord, or through a rape in which she had nothing to do with, the men in her family will take immediate actions which result in the death of the young woman. (Afkhani 176)

Centuries of rule by various foreign authorities have reinforced the family as a location of power in some Middle Eastern societies. (Ruggi, 144) Even today, the family is directly responsible for defending its honor. In many communities, this means that murder in the name of honor is family business, not frowned upon by the local community. As a result, the murderer is unlikely to be reprimanded in court, and is seen as a hero by many.

One truly frightful story belongs to that of Samia Sarwar, a 29-year-old Pakistani woman, mother of two young boys. On April 6, Samia was sitting in the office of a leading human rights lawyer, Ms. Hina Jilani, sister of another well-known human rights activist and Supreme Court advocate, Ms. Asma

Jahangir, chairperson of the National Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. Samia had been trying to get a divorce from her husband, Dr. Imran Saleh, for the last 4 years. She had left her marital home in 1995 after years of abuse and violence at the hands of her husband. Dr. Imran had pushed Samia down the stairs while she was pregnant with their second child. That was when she decided to do something about her situation, packed her bags, and fled her husband's house, in hopes that her mother and father would give her shelter in their home. However, in the name of honor, they refused to accept her plea that she should be allowed to file for divorce. The man she had married was her first cousin; a divorce would certainly cause shame to the family name. Besides, she was told, there was still her younger sister to be married, and should the family name be shamed in such a way, it would be nearly impossible for the young girl to find a suitor.

For four years Samia waited in the hope that her parents would change their minds. Finally, in desperation, she moved out of her family home into a women's shelter in Lahore and turned to Ms. Jilani for help. Together, the two women got to work on finalizing a petition for dissolution of marriage on the grounds of desertion. At the same time, Samia's parents called Jilani and requested she schedule a meeting for them to speak to Samia. Jilani agreed on the condition that only Samia's mother would arrive to the meeting.

What happened next is merely a glimpse at the horrifying acts that take place all over the world amongst hundreds and thousands of women. Samia and Ms. Jilani almost gave up when the mother did not appear at the appointed hour and were packing up to leave when she walked in, not alone as she had promised, but with a man - strongly built and bearded. Samia

seemed to have recognized him. He moved forward to greet her as Samia got up, but his greeting was a shot in the face from a pistol which he had been concealing in his coat. Samia died instantly.

In the chaos that followed, the killer fled the room, along with Samias mother. The guards in the building managed to intercept the killer and shot him dead. It turned out he was Samia's family driver and had been instructed by her father to kill her.

Samias mother literally stood by and watched, knowingly, as a man pulled out a gun and shot her daughter in the face. Samias father hired the man to kill her. Has justice seen to it that these two stand trial? Has justice sent them away for murder? No. The concept of family honor continues to dictate. Thus, while many expressed horror at what had taken place, silence prevailed. Pakistani politicians who dared to condemn Samias murder were silenced. One political leader, however, Ms. Benazir Bhutto, condemned the murder and expressed solidarity with the human rights lawyers. She now faces a prison sentence on corruption charges. (Ali 88-94)

If the laws in these countries do not change, no womans life will be safe. It is because of these laws that so many millions of women are losing their lives unnecessarily, and the men that commit these heinous crimes manage to walk away free. For example, according to Jordans Penal Code, (November 16, 1960):

He who discovers his wife or one of his female unlawfully, committing adultery with another, and he kills, wounds or injures one or both of them, is exempt from any penalty. He who catches his wife, or one of his female ascendants or descendants or sisters with another in an unlawful bed and he

kills or wounds or injures one or both of them, benefits from a reduction in penalty. (Article 340)

Moreover, should a woman fear for her life in such situations, and requests the help of the higher government, it is she not the potential killer who is jailed involuntarily for her own safety. (Afkhani 183)

Some of the cases that have come out of Jordan include the story of 19-year-old Hanan Abed, who was shot to death by her brother, 22-year-old Mohammed, in what the courts called a fit of fury. Her crime? Going out to eat with a male cousin without the permission of her brother. (Goodnough) Abed was jailed for six months, having invoked a clause in the Jordanian law providing for reduced sentences for those who kill female relatives they suspect of having brought the family "honor" into disrepute. (see Jordan Penal Code)

Yasmine Abdullah, 20, was shot four times in the chest by her brother, Sirhan, last March after she reported having been raped by a family member. Although the victim of the rape, she too had tarnished the family "honor". Sirhan spent six months in prison, once again thanks to the Jordan Penal Code. (Goodnough)

Also in Jordan, a woman rushed to a higher court, demanding justice. The woman was outraged that a court had just given her husband only 6 months in prison for killing their 15-year-old daughter. The court had sided with the father, who claimed that his unmarried daughter's pregnancy had dishonored him and therefore he had the right to take her life.

What he did not tell the court, the mother said, was that he had raped his daughter and was the father of the unborn child. The woman told the judges

that nobody would believe her and if they did, she would be killed for sure for shaming her husband. (Franklin 3)

Before his death in 1999, however, King Hussein of Jordan spoke out and voiced his concerns about this problem. He was against honor killings, and did not believe them to be justified by the Islamic laws. (Franklin 7) They are working hard in Jordan to help create a more equal justice system between men and women. It seems unlikely, but the step is in the right direction.

Iman Khader, a feminine activist and human rights lawyer in Jordan says, I have faith that change will come. Some of that faith stems from the way women have been gaining a foothold in Jordan's daily life and business world. (Khader 77-79)

How does a code that effects the lives of so many women, young and old, in such a negative way get destroyed? What should be the actions taken to assure that this will never happen to another woman, anywhere, again? The answers to such questions do not come easily. The first step is to remove the boundaries between men and women, to realize that a womans body belongs to no one but herself. She is not property; she is not an object. She is a woman. A woman with rights; a woman with honor; a woman who should be free to say and do as she pleases.

In this day and age, it is difficult to understand how some of the Middle Eastern and Asian countries can stay so caught up in the past. Their behavior is almost primitive. They should know enough to understand that it is inhumane to treat others in such a respect. It is not religion that forces them to do this. Religion does not honor these killings. The struggle to remain powerful and the evidence by which they choose to prove their power is the

driving force behind their control over women.

Many women have risked their lives and created this awareness and movement that will not allow for sacrifices to be made at the expense of womens bodies. Time will tell how successful the measures taken will be.

Bibliography: