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# Honour Killing in Punjab: Reasons and Implications

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*This research is an attempt to develop understanding of the phenomenon of Honour Killing (HK) which is pervasive all over the Punjab. This practice persists which cuts across almost all the social groups nationwide. Every year hundreds of women are killed in the name of honour in Pakistan. Certain social sections recognize HK, as justified practice, entailing various forms with regard to particular milieu of four provinces. In spite of the rising awareness, this practice is well-entrenched even in Pakistan's most developed province i.e. Punjab. Over the years, the laws regarding HK are passed to improve efficacy of judicial system of Pakistan, but certain lacunas provide sufficient room to the offenders to misuse them. This study is an attempt to illustrate the overall mind set of the society and understand the reasons behind the murder in the name of Honour. This research will be descriptive as well as exploratory in nature. In this study, qualitative methods will be adopted. This research will help to identify the root causes of HK and also give direction to ascertain the authenticity of this practice in Punjab. Some recommendations will also be suggested in the light of the above mentioned analysis to eradicate this problem.*

**Key Words:** Quasi-Judicial mechanism, mitigating, illicit, commodification, lacunas.

## **Introduction**

Honour killing retains a long history and is linked to the emergence of patriarchal social structures in which the honour of family and community came to be attached to the sexuality of women. "Men are entrusted with safeguarding the family honour through their control over female family members, specifically controlling the female body, in terms of both its sexuality and its reproductive ability".<sup>1</sup> Failure to exercise control over women is openly challenged by people in our society. Honour Killing, as a custom, has been evolved over the centuries which, is adopted as a part of culture in Punjab. "Women are accountable for their every action because she carries the honour of the family with her. Many restrictions have been designated on the basis of social codes as well as perceptions regarding honour".<sup>2</sup> "These social codes perpetuate the absolute authority of men to use violence as a tool to control their women".<sup>3</sup>

Despite of all these transformations today, our centuries-old traditions are still intact applying specific code of conduct for women in Pakistan. The women must follow them, otherwise, it may be considered as a source of dishonor to the family. To kill the women is understood as a permitted and accepted act in various social groups. It seems that their honour lies in the bodies of their women. Under mitigating circumstances, they can kill their women to preserve their honour. The actions which bring dishonor to the family include "a woman wanting to marry a man of her choice; wishing to seek employment outside the home; publicly disobeying the family patriarch; being accused of having illicit relations or seeking a divorce".<sup>4</sup> Moreover, women are also murdered to attain some ulterior objectives under the garb of honour. Misinterpretation of religion also may result in murder in the name of honour. Islam condemns honour killing and regards it as un-Islamic cultural practice.

Despite of passing various laws, the number of honour killing cases is increasing day by day. There is a lot of difference between the number of cases reported by media and actual registered incidents. While going through the media reports, one can easily understand the fact that very few cases are filed, but the actual number of cases is much higher.

## **Honour Killing in Punjab**

This practice is also being followed in various areas of Punjab. Southern Punjab is predominantly marked by many researchers as the area which has been criticized for its grave human rights violations against women. Anti-women practices occur in northern Punjab as well. Punjab is, definitely, a male obsessed region which strictly follows a gender biased societal set up and patriarchal mind set. "Brothers, fathers and husbands subject 82% of women to domestic violence in this province. The incident of wife battering is so common that it is not even recognized as a pernicious form of violence against women. Women are motivated to not to register the cases of even serious injuries by police officers. They are

always encouraged to reconcile with their husbands as such cases bring shame to them”.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 1: Gender Roles**

Man	Woman
Honour	Shame
Public sphere (Work outside the home, breadwinner)	Domestic sphere (Work in the home, house land, child care)
Dominance	Subordination

Source: [www.google.com/search?q=gender+roles+tables+in.Pakistan](http://www.google.com/search?q=gender+roles+tables+in.Pakistan)

“There is the famous proverb, “*Zan, Zar, Zameen*” meaning women, money and land are considered the main sources of evil which clearly shows how women are dealt with in this province. These are hallmarks of a man’s honor in Pakistan”.<sup>6</sup> Women are dealt with as commodities and these commodities are highly valuable and made to be under man’s possession. “Policing may involve tragic acts of violence including ‘honour killing’ because the fact that a man has lost control over his women implies “a loss of masculinity that is more costly to the man than the woman’s life.”<sup>7</sup> Women are regarded as property which must be possessed by the male member of family. This set up is reminiscent of slavery.

As far as the origin of this practice in Punjab is concerned, it’s a general perception that Arab migrants brought this tradition to the areas where the present day Pakistan is situated. Their invasions in Sindh made this tradition prevail in the nearby areas, known as Balochistan (in Pakistan). Some researchers assert that “the tradition of honour killing was spread by Baloch and Pashtun clans. The migration of Baloch in other areas and their interaction permeated it rapidly”<sup>8</sup>. In Balochistan, due to the harsh weather and for seeking more opportunities economically, Baloch used to travel to other parts and carried their customary practices with them. Documents of colonial rule evidenced that Balochistan visibly indicated the practice of honour killing.

### **Main reasons for Honour killing**

In many societies there are great similarities in honour related crimes. In many societies, women are killed and murdered in the name of honor, for certain acts. Such situations occur in specific communities with certain materialistic intention behind murder. Not only culture, but often greed governs such murders. Various factors are exacerbating violence against women in Punjab. Few of the main reasons of honour killing are discussed here:

### **Commodification of Women**

In many communities, the sale of woman for monetary gain is an ancient practice. Fathers vend their daughter for a bride price. Daughters are sold for a specific amount and sometimes in exchange for a young wife for the father. “This practice is still prevalent in many areas of southern Punjab. The bargaining and sale of women for money is clear evidence of the commodification of women”.<sup>9</sup> In

Punjab, if a person is tilling someone's land and wants to take it away, ironically the best way is to brand a woman of his family as *Kali* (an adultress) and label the man as *Kala* (an adulterer) and kill them. Nafeesa Shah concludes that "the honour killing industry turns the honour upside down and indicates its degeneration. Women have monetary worth in themselves in various societies and can be exchanged for money, but to knowingly kill them on false charges of sexual activity for monetary purposes is equivalent to prostituting them. As in the honour system to use a woman to make money would be a dishonourable act".<sup>10</sup>

### **Biasness of Police**

The agencies which are liable for implementation of laws are often regarded gender as biased. Police often performs its role as the custodian of customary practices rather than defender of the writ of state. The persistence of anti-women practices shows that the plan of proposed training of gender sensitization has never been executed in Punjab.

Another major problem is that, Pakistani Police lack the modern mechanism of investigation. Obsolete methods of investigation were being used in the police department. Police procedures and record keeping processes are manual at that time because of the limited resources available to them. The recorded data is hand written without any certain specific layout of composition. However, if the registered information is lost, no one can retrieve it. The lack of skilled personnel and scarcity of computers has made the process to register and record the data more difficult.

### **Biased Judicial system**

"Culture and law go hand in hand in society. In fact, complete dichotomy between both could not be possible. Laws are prescribed or interpreted on the basis of social norms. "Despite of the textual provision of law, honour killing, as a socially accepted phenomenon, has been validated by the judicial system".<sup>11</sup> On the basis of many previous verdicts of honour killing related cases, it has been observed that many judges are biased particularly in the cases of honour killing.

### **Lacunas in legal system**

The key contributing factor is the government's failure to seek effective measures to end the practice and the virtual impunity with which such killings are carried out. Annually, many cases used to be dealt in such a way that *Qisas* (retribution for murder and bodily hurt, e.g., an eye for an eye) and *Diya* (blood money payable to the heirs of a victim in case of murder) Ordinance as well as the provision of grave and sudden provocation provided grounds to the assailants to demand mitigation of sentence, "It's not unprecedented that judges took the liability to explore the mitigating grounds to apply the plea of provocation so that they could help to avoid punishments".<sup>12</sup> *Qisas* and *Diya* ordinance which grant the family the right to pardon the perpetrator, who usually used to be their

own part of family, help to circumvent the judicial trial. If the murder has been planned by all the family members collectively, then the conviction is almost impossible.

Despite of legislations which had been promulgated to target this issue, honour killing persists with all its dynamism in our society. It is not out of place to say that laws could help to stop this issue. The Anti-Honour killing Bill failed to detain the trend to resolve this issue by making the arrangement of compromise is still being followed. "In 99.99 percent cases of honour killing, the offenders go scot free".<sup>13</sup>

### **Camouflage**

In many families, the tradition of honour killing is also used to attain ulterior objectives mainly, to take revenge and acquire property or escape of repayment of loan. Sometimes, a murder would be portrayed as the killing in the name of honour which is the legitimate reason to give lesser punishment to the offender. Honour Killing is used to justify the attempts in which men kill intentionally as the result of enmity, "This is accomplished by separately murdering the enemy and one's own close female relative and then placing their dead bodies together in a compromising position. It is then claimed that they were both killed under grave and sudden provocation and in order to vindicate the family honour".<sup>14</sup> In such cases, the culprit can claim lesser punishment which is mostly accommodated.

### **Community-Based Adjudicatory Mechanisms**

Although, the government has declared these bodies unlawful, delay in judicial process and expensive litigation leave spaces open for informal judicial system. "Criminal justice in Punjab is deeply mired in local politics because of the huge power concentrated in the hands of landlords".<sup>15</sup> However, "this unofficial power structure like *Panchayat* (group of influential people of the area who have decision making authority in Punjab) seems to be especially concerned with offences against honour and perceived to be sole executive power where women's voice is not supposed to be heard".<sup>16</sup>

"According to a report by UNDP (2006), in underdeveloped countries, community-based adjudicatory mechanisms deal with 80% of the total cases but this system poses a serious risk to human rights because of their unlawful decisions. The whole set up observed as biased, discriminatory and against the international standards of human rights".<sup>17</sup> "These bodies unlawfully impose punishments on those who assert their individual rights against the prescribed norms of the community".<sup>18</sup> It's a question mark on the efficiency of Punjab government that despite the initiation of various commissions, protection authorities and laws, women are insecure and struggling for their life.

Women are no more than a source of settling feuds which is known as restorative justice of *Panchayat* system. Mukhtar says in her memoir 'in the Name of Honour' that "a woman is simply an object of possession, revenge or honour in

front of the *Panchayat*; she is married or raped according to the concept of tribal pride, and the custom does not give her any rights at all".<sup>19</sup> Vanni/Swara (Women given in compensation to the aggrieved party to settle dispute), as lawful practices, are still in vogue. Sometimes, such exchange is for monetary gains.

### **Lust for Money**

In Pakistan the concept of *gairat* (honour) is used to compensate for poverty and to hide economic motives or greed. This greed prompts men to declare the woman an adulteress and sell her. The labeled women in Punjab are sold through brokers who escort her to the urban areas and use or sell her for fulfilling the purpose of prostitution. Lust for money has prompted many men to sacrifice the lives of their daughters, mothers, sisters and other female relatives of their family. Similarly, property and land have become another fundamental cause of honor killing. If a woman extends claim for her assets, she is apprehended or murdered in the name of honour.

### **Forced marriages**

To achieve certain objectives, families force their girls to accept the bondage of wedlock. Certain kinds of forced marriages are common in our society. A few families tie their daughters into a forced wedlock without their consent. Another category is child marriage in which minor girls are coerced to marry a man double of her age who probably is an affluent person. Another type of marriage is known as *WattaSatta* or *Shigar*. In this marriage, one pair of siblings is married to another brother and sister. The women who belong to feudal families, in certain conditions, must go to *Haqbakhshi* (marriage with the Quran) so that the possession of the whole property can be retained by male member of the family.

When the girls refuse such imposed relationship, they usually get into trouble. Such an act of defiance regarded as affront for the whole family and she is nominated to be killed in the name of honour".<sup>20</sup>

### **Negative role of media**

Many media reports do not encourage police investigation by depicting honour killing as routine matter. Moreover, the language which they use to describe such incidents poses a negative impression. The sentences like "*bhaagkarshadi*" or "*mirasam*" means a girl who had illicit relations with a person, ran away from home and got married, portraying the victim as a culprit and justify the barbaric verdicts of *Panchayat* like honour killing, "That sort of reporting generates negativity in the minds of audience about women. Besides the stress of civil society, hardly any news story covers the version of victims".<sup>21</sup>

### **Child Birth**

If a woman gives birth to a female child, she may have the chance to be declared an adulteress (*Kari*). Under the garb of honour, men kill their wives

because of the fear of having a female child again. She is intended to be murdered so that man can marry for a second time to have a male child.

### **Marriage by choice**

The demand to choose a marriage partner is considered as the highest act of defiance in certain communities where guardians prefer arranged marriages. This act not only damages the family honour, but also diminishes the chances to obtain a bride price for a family. The women, who marry of their own choice by taking recourse of legal authorities, place their families in a very awkward situation in which they have to face the *tanoharsh* comments of society. In that situation, punitive action is preferred to be taken by the family. The only solution left is to kill the woman to restore honour.

### **Seeking Divorce**

Seeking divorce is also one of the reasons of honour killing. When women take the initiative to get rid of an abusive husband, they cannot count on the full acceptance of the community. Hundreds of women are targeted every year for claiming divorce against the will of their families. Many incidents witness that women would be murdered if the traditional honour scheme was challenged. "This has been considered non-virtuous action that defiled a man's honour and led to the death of the women in question".<sup>22</sup>

### **Rape**

Honour killing is pervasively delineated as the source to resolve many issues related to women. Its prospect has become widened, "Women are killed simultaneously to restore the family honour, once the confusion has aroused, without giving her a chance to defend herself. It's axiomatic that rape also causes honour killing because it brings shame rather to the family of the victim than the rapist".<sup>23</sup> Several women were killed despite the fact that the action which brought shame was consensual or not.

### **Illiteracy**

Illiteracy is one of the major reasons of the victimization of women in the hands of men. Women fall prey to the several human rights violations and honour killing. A large number of women are unable to accept any change and can not understand the reformation in legal system. They do not want to break the chains of customary practices. In fact, a large number of people in Punjab believe that honour killing is just.

### **Adultery**

Adultery means sexual relations without a legal bond of marriage. Adultery or suspicion of illicit relation seems challenge to family honour, religious ordains and cultural norms. However, man can exert his absolute control over her behavior in order to protect her chastity. Sexual relations out of wedlock is an

aberrant and is considered highly illegal, especially for women. If she is ever found suspicious in her conduct, she is supposed to be killed to restore honour.

## Recommendations

According to all the collected data, it's quite evident that there are several dynamics of honour killing such as social, political, religious and economic. No single reason could be identified as the main cause of this problem. Moreover, the trends of killing in Punjab can be generalized to the whole of Pakistan as these were also quite similar across the province. Honour killing cannot be eradicated overnight, but is a long process to wipe out. In the light of the collected facts a few suggestions are recommended which are as follows:

- First of all, government should publically announce that any kind of violent act against women will not be tolerated. The State will not condone if anyone kills in the name of honour, whoever is responsible for this, must be brought to justice.
- More stringent laws must be implemented by the state so that the offenders are afraid of the punishment of this criminal offense.
- "The informal judicial structures like *Panchayat* must be declared as the illegal bodies. All the decisions which are made by them should be clearly marked unlawful."<sup>24</sup>
- "Government should design the awareness program in support of equal rights of women. Through proper legislation, all kind of domestic violence should be declared a crime".<sup>25</sup>
- "All the bodies which involved in the dispensation of justice like police, prosecutors, magistrates, judges, medico-legal personnel should be well aware of the laws to eradicate honour killing".<sup>26</sup>
- "Police department needs a foremost overhaul so that they could learn and use latest techniques of investigation in the cases like honour killing. They need to be strengthened in terms of time management, assessing priorities regarding a heinous crime, and be updated on different and latest methods, such as forensic investigation".<sup>27</sup>
- "Although, killing in the name of honour is occurring more in rural areas, but it has been followed as very common practice in urban areas also. With the help of civil society large scale awareness programs should be initiated to create consciousness about this practice".<sup>28</sup>
- As Pakistan is the signatory of Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the initiation of this kind of programme is vital to fulfill its obligation. In launching of this programme, the collaboration of NGOs, human rights activists would be very helpful to eradicate violence against women".<sup>29</sup>
- Unfortunately, women are not aware of the laws which are drafted for their protection. This information could be propagated through the programmes and various publications.



- Those women who escape death and require protection should be given proper security. In such cases, women are afraid that they may not survive much longer without some form of formal protection from the social or legal agencies; they are under a constant fear of inevitable death or harm.

“Pakistan, as a developing country, has many financial problems, should take one step ahead and empower their women. No country could progress when their women have fallen prey to oppression, violence and illiteracy”.<sup>30</sup>

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