

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

ATTITUDES ABOUT HONOUR KILLING AMONG MEN AND WOMEN
—PERSPECTIVE FROM ISLAMABAD

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Background: The concept of honour has cultural, social and moral underpinnings that determine its expression and perseverance. Women are viewed as the bearers of family honour with chastity equated with abstinence from premarital or extramarital relationships and obeying norms determined and dictated by traditions and societies. The objective of this study was to determine the opinions of men and women pertaining to killing in the name of and saving one's honour. **Methods:** A cross-sectional survey with convenience sampling was conducted among the 18 years and older (range 18–71) men and women. Respondents were approached in markets, bus-stops, hospitals, and various other public places in Islamabad from April 12th to June 27th 2006. A structured, interviewer-administered, and pre-tested questionnaire was used with both open and close-ended questions on demographics and attitudes about honour killing based on a vignette that was slowly read out in Urdu, in a neutral and judgment-free tone of voice to potential respondents. Responses to close-ended questions based on the vignette provided, and pattern among men and women were compared using Pearson Chi-square test to determine associations between the dichotomous variables and gender, while responses to one open-ended question were summarised based on the observed similarities and bivariate associations with gender were determined. **Results:** We approached 630 conveniently selected individuals at various public places in the city of Islamabad. Six hundred and one agreed to participate and completed the questionnaire, i.e., the response rate was 95.4%. Three hundred and seven respondents were male (51.1%), and 294 (48.9%) were females. Three hundred forty-three 343 (57.1%) respondents believed that the man in the vignette did the right thing by killing his wife upon finding her in bed with another man. Divorcing one's wife rather than resorting to killings, after having found her with another man was approved by 220 (36.6%) respondents, while the rest answered as 'don't know'. **Conclusion:** Majority of men as well as women considered it justifiable and acceptable to kill one's wife as a mean to save one's honour. The most significant finding was the fact that overwhelming number of men and women did not believe in either forgiveness or divorcing one's wife who has engaged in extramarital sexual relationship.

Keywords: Honour killing, Women, Opinion

INTRODUCTION

The concept of honour has cultural, social and moral underpinnings that determine its expression and perseverance. Women are viewed as the bearers of family honour with chastity equated with abstinence from premarital or extramarital relationships and obeying norms determined and dictated by traditions and societies.¹ Men involved in premarital or extramarital relationships are viewed differently. According to a recent report quoting the federal Ministry of Interior, there were 4,100 honour killings in the preceding four years,² while some five thousand women are murdered every year around the world for actual or perceived behaviour deemed incommensurate with honour by members of their very own families³. Violence against women is common, as one in three women suffer from some form of violence in her lifetime from her intimate partner alone.⁴ Nefarious interplay of personal and socio-cultural factors, colludes to perpetrate and perpetuate violence against women in societies.⁵ Killing women in the name of honour or any

other pretext is the ultimate form of domestic violence or spousal abuse, depending on who commits the crime. There is a dearth of scientific studies on honour killings internationally, but this heinous practice has been reported in many newspapers, reports and website from many parts of the world including Britain, Iraq, India in addition to Jordan and Pakistan.⁶⁻¹⁰

A descriptive study in Jordan based on court files of all women murdered in 1995 reported that out of 89 murdered women, 38 were killed in the name of honour either by their brothers or husbands¹⁰. Society's acceptance and sanctification of extrajudicial killings masquerading as saving honour are disturbing and need to be studied and documented so as to develop meaningful responses in our country.¹¹ The killing of women for alleged or perceived involvement in premarital or extramarital sexual relationships, so as to restore one's honour is practiced in all parts of Pakistan.¹¹

We conducted this study to determine the opinions of conveniently selected individuals from

public places in Islamabad, pertaining to killing in the name of and saving one's honour; based on a brief vignette that entailed killing of wife by a husband who finds her with another man in bed.

SUBJECTS AND METHODS

A cross-sectional survey with convenience sampling was conducted among the 18 years and older men and women; who were approached in markets, bus-stops, hospitals, and various other public places in Islamabad. Two male and two female graduate students trained in data collection, individually approached potential respondents of their gender.

A structured, interviewer-administered, and pre-tested questionnaire was used with both open and close-ended questions on demographics and opinions about honour killing based on a vignette that was slowly read out in Urdu, in a neutral and judgment-free tone of voice to potential respondents. The questionnaire, including the vignette was forward and backward translated and described a scenario entailing honour killing, i.e., 'I want to ask your opinion about a man who one day returns home from work to find his wife with another man, a stranger, in his bed. To save his and his family's honour he kills his wife'.

The vignette and the questionnaire's face and content validity was checked and approved by two senior psychologists, and all the authors. Respondents were explained the objective of the study as opinions about honour killings; and after obtaining verbal consent, the questionnaire was administered and responses were rerecorded verbatim by the interviewers. Complete confidentiality was assured to all participants; names and addresses were not asked or recorded, and voluntary participation was emphasised in this study.

Statistical analysis was done using STATA 9. Three choices as 'yes', 'no', or 'don't know' were offered for the four close-ended questions, and prior to further analyses 'don't know' responses were eliminated. Responses to close-ended questions based on the vignette provided, and pattern among men and women were compared using Pearson Chi-square test to determine associations between the dichotomous variables and gender. Responses to one open-ended question were summarised based on the observed similarities and bivariate associations with gender were determined.

RESULTS

We approached 630 conveniently selected individuals at various public places in Islamabad. Six hundred and one agreed to participate and completed the questionnaire; only 29 individuals declined to participate, primarily owing to time constraints. Hence the response rate was 95.4%. Three hundred and seven respondents were male (51.1%), and 294

(48.9%) were females. Mean age of respondents was 35.4 years (range 18–71 years). One hundred and eighty-five (30.8%) respondents had no formal education, 153 (25.4%) respondents had 5–9 years of education, while, 236 (39.3%) had done matriculate i.e. ten years of formal education. Four hundred and sixty (76.5%) respondents were married, 125 (20.8%) were single, and rest were either divorced or widowed. Cumulatively, 343 (57.1%) respondents believed that the man in the vignette did the right thing by killing his wife, 238 (39.6%) believed that it was not the right thing to do, while (3.3%) replied as 'don't know'.

This viewpoint was further reinforced by the fact that saving honour was deemed to entail killing the 'man' as well. Three hundred and forty-one (56.7%) respondents thought that the 'man' should also have been killed, and 223 (37.1%) replied negatively. Divorcing one's wife rather than resorting to killings, after having found her with another man was approved by 220 (36.6%) respondents. In response to the question that wife should have been forgiven and warned, was approved by only 121 (20.1%) respondents. Table-1 lists opinions of respondents by gender.

Table-1: Opinions regarding killing for honour based on the vignette

Opinions	Male		Female		p
	Yes n (%)	No n (%)	Yes n (%)	No n (%)	
Think the man did the right thing by killing his wife to save his honour. *(20 Don't Know: 14 M, 6 F)	190 (64.8)	103 (35.2)	153 (53.1)	135 (46.9)	0.004
Think the man should also have killed the man he found his wife with. *(37 Don't Know: 28 M – 9 F)	182 (65.2)	97 (34.8)	159 (55.8)	126 (44.2)	0.022
Think instead of killing his wife the man should have divorced his wife and had asked her to leave his house immediately. *(34 Don't Know: 15 M – 19 F)	103 (35.3)	189 (64.7)	117 (42.6)	158 (57.4)	0.076 NS**
Think the man should have forgiven his wife and had asked her not to cheat on him again. *(37 Don't Know: 17 M – 20 F)	44 (15.2)	246 (84.8)	77 (28.1)	197 (71.9)	<0.0005

*Responses as 'don't know' were excluded from Pearson Chi-square test, **Not Significant

Statistically significant differences were found between men and women using Pearson Chi-square tests for associations between the two genders and the appropriateness of wife killing by the man in the vignette, killing of wife as well as the other man, and regarding forgiveness of wife; while no statistically significant difference was observed for association

between the two genders and divorcing wife in a situation provided in the vignette. Analysis of the open-ended question pertaining to 'what would have been the best thing this man could have done to protect his honour' essentially echoed the results of close-ended questions with the exception that eleven (1.8%) respondents believed that only the man who was with his wife should have been killed.

DISCUSSION

Honour or lack thereof of it, is a socio-cultural concept whose expression is embedded in traditions. Killing of family women for restoring one's honour based on actual or perceived sexual indiscretions is practiced in all parts of Pakistan. To achieve high response rate we used a vignette to elicit opinions about honour killings, as during pre-testing respondents found it very offensive when questions were phrased as how would they react like or feel if they or their male family member killed his wife upon seeing her with another man. Results demonstrate that individuals in our study, regardless of educational attainment, accepted the notion of killing one's wife in the name of honour upon discovering extramarital relationship. Although statistically significant differences were observed between men and women; as more men approved killing of wife as well as the man she was with in the vignette. However, over half of women were equally approving of killings. While more women thought that wife should have been divorced compared to men, but the difference was not statistically significant. The most disturbing finding in our study was the fact that some 72% of women and 85% of men did not believe in forgiveness and hence a chance for atonement and redemption. These results need to be interpreted with caveats as all respondents were conveniently selected in this study. Hence the study respondents are not representative of either the city in which this study was conducted nor the various educational groups in which the respondents belonged to. In 2004, the National Assembly passed the Criminal Law (Amendment) Bill 2004 to enhance punishment for honour-related crimes, commonly referred to as *Karo-Kari/Siyah-Kari* traditions. Albeit a watershed legislation against honour killings and protection of women in the country; it is only a start. As change in traditions and opinions tend to be a slow and tedious process following landmark decisions. The level of intolerance and approval of violence observed in our conveniently selected respondents against the backdrop of a country that allows women to fly fighter jets and run for and hold the highest political office is ironic¹²; underlining the need to study attitudes about violence against women in population based representative studies to better understand and effectively address misguided notions pertaining to honour. Learning about the societal opinions and attitudes pertaining to domestic

violence in its myriad manifestations is the first step towards preventing this abhorrent practice. Amnesty International has been at the forefront of identifying and addressing honour killings around the world. As an effective preventive measure for honour killings, it has made a recommendation to the Government of Pakistan that data and statistics need to be collected "in a manner that makes the problem visible".⁹ Physicians not only wear the hats of a healer but also act as health educators and promoters. Often being the 'first-contact they can positively influence opinions of their patients along with identifying and reporting at-risk women or potential perpetrators of honour killing to various social and/or law enforcement agencies. This is a responsibility that physicians share with the society in general. Professional medical associations, medical and nursing councils perhaps could play a pivotal role in developing practice guidelines for their members to do their part in preventing domestic violence in general and honour killings in particular. Effectively addressing and preventing the repellent truth of honour killings in our country transcends health sector and truly requires a multisectoral approach involving health, religious leaders, law enforcement, social services and the justice system.

CONCLUSION

Majority of men as well as women considered it justifiable and acceptable to kill one's wife in the event of extramarital sexual relationship as a mean to save one's honour, hence entirely circumventing judicial system. The most disturbing finding was the fact that overwhelming number of men and women did not believe in either forgiveness and in giving another chance to her, or to divorcing one's wife who has engaged in extramarital relationship. The findings albeit the first of its kind and hence preliminary, underscore the need for a population based study to determine attitudes and opinions and their correlates in our country to effectively address, analyze and prevent the problem of honour killings using a multisectoral approach.

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