

Honor Killings as a Tool of Social Control: A Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Honor killing is a complex and controversial social phenomenon in the history of human civilization, referring to acts of murder committed in the name of preserving the perceived honor of an individual, family, or community. This study examines honor killing as an informal mechanism of social control and traces its historical evolution from ancient tribal societies to the contemporary digital age. Employing historical, sociological, and anthropological approaches, the research investigates the origins, development, and underlying social dynamics of honor-based violence across diverse civilizations, cultures, and religious contexts. The study highlights how patriarchal structures, gender norms, and honor-based value systems have contributed to the persistence of this practice over time, despite significant social and legal transformations. Furthermore, it explores the challenges posed by modern technological advancements and globalization in reshaping the nature and perception of honor-related crimes. By providing a comparative and analytical perspective, this research seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of honor killing as a social issue and its implications for human rights, gender equality, and social justice. The article was prepared with the help of the Quran, Hadith, various research books and digital resources. Descriptive and analytical methods have been followed in its formulation.

Keywords: Honor Killing, Social Control, Patriarchy, Honor Culture, Human Rights, Social History, Gender Inequality.

INTRODUCTION

Honor killing, or murder committed in the name of preserving family honor, is a brutal social malpractice. Acts such as romantic relationships, self-choice marriages, divorce, becoming a victim of rape, disobeying family decisions, or engaging in behavior that deviates from socially accepted norms are among the common causes of honor killings. It represents an extreme manifestation of religious fanaticism and social control. Honor killing remains a significant social and cultural crisis in various societies across South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and other parts of the world. It is not an issue confined to any particular religion, ethnicity, or region. With the advancement of information technology and the growing acceptance of individual freedom, honor killing has acquired new dimensions. Every year, countless women, men, and children become victims of this barbaric practice. Today, this form of violence is no longer limited to traditional prejudices and superstitions; the influence of social media has also become increasingly significant. Digital platforms can sometimes contribute to the escalation and encouragement of honor-based violence. Research on this issue is not merely an academic necessity; it is essential for the protection of human rights, ensuring women's safety, eliminating religious misinterpretations, reforming legal systems, promoting social awareness, and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, comprehensive and contemporary research has become crucial for identifying and preventing the emerging forms of honor-based violence. This article discusses, analyzes, and critically examines these issues.

Definition of Honor Killing

Honor killing generally refers to a form of homicide in which a family member is killed on the pretext of protecting the so-called "honor" of a family or community. It is a form of violence typically perpetrated by male

family members against female relatives when they believe that the woman has brought shame or dishonor upon the family.¹ According to Phyllis Chesler, “Honor killing is the murder of a family member—particularly a woman or girl—by relatives who believe that the victim has brought shame or dishonor upon the family.”² Likewise, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines honor killing as the murder of a woman or girl, usually by male family members, who claim that the victim has damaged the family's reputation, dignity, or honor and that the killing was necessary to restore that honor.³ According to Amnesty International, “Honor killing is the murder of women by family members who believe that the victims have brought dishonor upon the family.”⁴ In essence, honor killing is the deliberate killing of a family member—most often a woman—for the purported purpose of preserving or restoring the honor of a family or clan.

Contradictions in the Terminology

The term “honor” is commonly associated with social prestige, family reputation, religious and cultural values, and notions of social control. The very naming of this practice reflects a deeply rooted social mentality, power structure, and patriarchal value system. Although “honor” ordinarily denotes personal or familial dignity, in the context of honor killing it is largely a socially constructed concept. In many societies, family honor is closely linked to a woman's behavior, dress, romantic relationships, marriage, sexuality, and social interactions. Consequently, when a woman attempts to pursue a romantic relationship, choose her own spouse, or lead an independent life contrary to family expectations, her actions may be perceived as bringing “dishonor” to the family. In this context, the term “honor” does not represent genuine moral virtue; rather, it functions as a mechanism of social control.⁵

The term “killing,” on the other hand, signifies the intentional taking of human life. Its use underscores the fact that honor killing is not merely a form of social punishment but a grave violation of human rights and a serious criminal offense. A fundamental contradiction exists within the expression “honor killing.” Honor is generally regarded as a positive moral value, yet in this context it is invoked to justify an act of extreme violence and criminality. Therefore, it can be argued that the term “honor killing” is inherently misleading because it risks implicitly legitimizing the motives of the perpetrators. For this reason, contemporary scholarship and human rights literature increasingly employ the terms “so-called honor killing” and “honor-based violence” to emphasize that such acts bear no genuine relationship to honor.⁶

Causes of Honor Killing

Honor killings are often driven by social beliefs, tribal notions of prestige, the desire to control women, and misconceptions transmitted across generations. Lynn Welchman and Sara Hossain describe honor killings as a form of violence rooted in socially constructed concepts of honor. According to them, perceptions of dishonor are not based on actual wrongdoing but rather on social beliefs and cultural prejudices.⁷ Research conducted by Human Rights Watch indicates that in many regions of Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan, love marriages, inter-caste marriages, interfaith marriages, and women's independent decision-making are often regarded as sources of family dishonor.⁸ In reality, however, these actions do not constitute crimes; rather, they reflect social conservatism and deeply ingrained prejudices. Phyllis Chesler argues that the roots of honor killing lie not in religion but in tribal customs and patriarchal cultures.⁹

Several misconceptions commonly contribute to honor killings. These include the beliefs that romantic relationships damage family honor, marriage without family consent is unacceptable, women who become victims of rape bring shame upon their families, divorce causes dishonor, women's independent lifestyles undermine family prestige, and even social rumors can tarnish family reputation. In her influential work *In Honor of Fadime: Murder and Shame*, Unni Wikan observes that the central driving force behind honor killings is the belief that family honor is controlled by men and determined by the behavior of women.¹⁰

Pressure from relatives, neighbors, and tribal or community networks often encourages families to commit such crimes.¹¹ In some conservative societies, women's education, employment, and economic independence are perceived as challenges to traditional family authority. As a result, women who exercise independent judgment and decision-making are more likely to become victims of honor-based violence.¹²

According to reports by the United Nations, weak legal frameworks and a culture of impunity are among the major factors that allow honor killings to persist. Some individuals attempt to legitimize these crimes through religious rhetoric and selective interpretations of religious teachings.¹³ However, such efforts constitute a misuse of religion. Authentic religious teachings generally emphasize justice, human dignity, compassion, and the rule of law. Honor killing stands in direct contradiction to these fundamental principles. As Asma Barlas succinctly states: “Honor killing is a cultural practice, not a religious injunction.”¹⁴

Historical Background

The term *honor killing* originated and gained currency through specific historical and cultural perceptions of honor and shame. Historical evidence suggests that as early as 2000–1000 BCE, societies in Mesopotamia, Babylonia, Assyria, and ancient Rome socially legitimized the killing of women in the name of regulating female sexuality and protecting family honor. In many ancient legal systems, fathers, husbands, or other male family members were granted the authority to kill women under certain circumstances.¹⁵

One of the earliest known legal codes, the *Code of Ur-Nammu* (c. 2100–2050 BCE), promulgated by the Sumerian king Ur-Nammu, stipulated that a married woman involved in an “illicit” relationship could be sentenced to death, while the male participant might escape punishment.¹⁶ This provision is often regarded as one of the earliest legal foundations of honour-based violence.

Similarly, the *Assyrian Code* permitted male family members to impose severe punishments, including death, on women accused of “indecent” or “dishonorable” conduct.¹⁷ In many cases, even women who were victims of sexual assault were considered a source of family disgrace and consequently became targets of violence.

In ancient Rome, the male head of the household, known as the *pater familias*, exercised extensive authority over his wife, daughters, and children. Under Roman law, women accused of adultery could be killed by male family members, and such actions were often socially accepted.¹⁸ Likewise, during certain dynastic periods in ancient China, family heads were reportedly permitted to kill daughters or wives accused of behavior deemed dishonourable.¹⁹

In the ancient Aztec and Inca civilizations of Central and South America, adultery was considered a grave offence. Women accused of such acts were sometimes publicly executed, a practice viewed as necessary for preserving familial and societal honour.²⁰ Honour-related violence also appeared in medieval Europe. Historical records indicate that in some Jewish and Christian communities, women accused of adultery were subjected to stoning or public execution. These themes were also reflected in contemporary literature and cultural narratives.²¹

Broadly speaking, honor killing has existed for thousands of years in various tribal and rural societies across the Mediterranean region, the Middle East, and South Asia. In many of these societies, women's reproductive capacity and sexual conduct were perceived as symbols of family property and honor. During the biblical era, adultery was punishable by death, a principle that in some contexts contributed to the development of honor-based violence.²² Likewise, the *Code of Hammurabi* prescribed severe penalties for sexual offences and acts considered detrimental to family honour.²³

Sociologists generally argue that honor killing is rooted in patriarchal social structures in which women's bodies, sexuality, and marital choices are regarded as repositories of family honour.²⁴

Today, honor killing is recognized by international human rights organizations as a serious violation of human rights and a grave social crime. Pakistan remains one of the countries most frequently associated with honor killings, where the practice is commonly referred to as *Karo-Kari*. In such cases, killings are often perpetrated by family members themselves. In India, honour killings frequently occur in response to inter-caste or interfaith marriages. In several regions of northern India, informal caste councils known as *Khap Panchayats* play a significant role in enforcing social norms and, in some instances, have issued directives leading to the killing of couples. In Afghanistan, strict social control over women's autonomy has made honor-based violence a persistent concern, particularly in rural areas.

Although honor killings are comparatively less common in Bangladesh, incidents of violence related to romantic relationships, family disputes, and social stigma continue to occur, often being classified as domestic homicide or suicide. Nicole Pope describes honour killing as a historically evolved form of social and cultural violence. She argues that it is neither exclusively a Middle Eastern phenomenon nor an issue confined to Muslim societies; rather, it has existed in diverse historical and cultural contexts across the world.²⁵ In South Asia, honor killing remains closely linked to tribal customs, notions of social shame, and patriarchal cultural traditions.²⁶

In pre-Islamic Arabia, the practice of burying infant girls alive was often motivated by perceptions of shame and dishonor and may be considered one of the most extreme manifestations of honour-based violence. The Qur'an condemns this practice, stating: *"And when the girl [who was] buried alive is asked, for what sin she was killed."*²⁷ Historical accounts also describe the killing of male children among the Children of Israel under Pharaoh's rule. The Qur'an recalls this event: *"And [remember] when We saved you from the people of Pharaoh, who afflicted you with the worst torment, slaughtering your sons and sparing your women; and in that was a tremendous trial from your Lord."*²⁸ Such practices demonstrate that the roots of honour-related violence extend back more than four millennia. Although its manifestations and methods have evolved over time, honour killing remains a complex and deeply troubling social phenomenon.

Honor Killings Across the World

On 21 January 2002, 26-year-old Kurdish-Swedish woman Fadime Şahindal was murdered by her father in Sweden after refusing an arranged marriage imposed by her family.²⁹ In 2003, 17-year-old Shafiea Ahmed was killed by her parents in the United Kingdom for resisting a forced marriage. Both parents were later sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment. The case played a pivotal role in raising public awareness and strengthening legal responses to forced marriage and honour-based violence in the United Kingdom.³⁰ In 2005, 23-year-old Hatun Sürücü, a resident of Germany, was murdered by her younger brother after choosing an independent lifestyle outside the constraints of a conservative family structure. Her death sparked widespread debate in Germany regarding honour-based violence, women's rights, and social integration within immigrant communities.³¹ In 2007, Manoj Banwala (23) and Babli (19) from Haryana, India, were killed after marrying within the same clan (*gotra*). Following the declaration of their relationship as socially unacceptable by a local Khap Panchayat, they became victims of an honour killing. The subsequent convictions of those involved marked a significant legal precedent in India.³² On 15 July 2008, 26-year-old Ahmet Yıldız was shot and killed by his father in Turkey. The incident is widely regarded as the first publicly recognized honour killing of a gay man in modern Turkey.³³ In 2009, 20-year-old Noor Almaleki of Arizona, United States, was killed by her father after family tensions emerged over her adoption of a Western lifestyle.³⁴ In 2014, Pakistani woman Saba Qaiser married a man of her own choice. In response, her father and uncle attempted to kill her by shooting her and subsequently placing her in a sack and throwing her into a canal. Remarkably, she survived. Her story later inspired the internationally acclaimed documentary *A Girl in the River: The Price of Forgiveness*, which drew global attention to honour-based violence.³⁵ On 16 July 2016, Pakistani social media personality and model Qandeel Baloch (Fouzia Azeem) was murdered by her brother, who claimed that her independent lifestyle and outspoken public presence had brought dishonour upon the family. Following the murder, he openly admitted responsibility and justified the act as necessary to preserve family honor. The incident intensified public debate in Pakistan and strengthened calls for legal reforms aimed at combating honor killings.³⁶

Prevention of Honor Killing

Preventing honor killing remains a significant challenge; however, the eradication of this inhumane and abhorrent social practice is imperative. The following measures may contribute to its prevention:

1. **Enactment of Stringent Legislation:** The formulation of clear, comprehensive, and stringent laws is essential for preventing honor killings. Cases involving honour-based violence should be adjudicated through fast-track tribunals to ensure timely justice. It is equally important to eliminate legal loopholes and guarantee severe punishment for perpetrators.³⁷
2. **Adoption of a Zero-Tolerance Policy:** The eradication of honour killing requires the adoption and rigorous implementation of a coordinated zero-tolerance policy by the state, families, religious institutions, and

society at large. Teachers, law enforcement agencies, judges, religious leaders, and local administrators must work collectively to address this issue.³⁸

3. **Education and Economic Empowerment:** Women's access to education and economic independence should be strengthened. Education and financial self-sufficiency reduce vulnerability to honour-based violence and enhance women's ability to make independent life choices. According to UN Women, one of the most effective strategies for preventing violence against women is expanding educational opportunities, economic participation, and social empowerment.³⁹
4. **Promotion of Gender Equality and Human Rights:** Gender equality and human rights play a crucial role in preventing honour killings. When gender equality is established, society is more likely to abandon the perception of women as subordinate to men or as mere symbols of family honor and prestige. Educational curricula should therefore incorporate lessons on gender equality, human rights, and individual autonomy.⁴⁰
5. **Engagement of Religious and Community Leaders:** The involvement of religious and community leaders is essential in combating honor killings. When religious leaders publicly denounce honor killing as both inhumane and contrary to religious teachings, its social acceptability diminishes considerably. Research conducted by UNFPA identifies the active participation of local religious and community leaders as a key preventive strategy.⁴¹
6. **Emergency Support and Protection Services:** Without immediate assistance, safe shelter, and legal protection, individuals at risk of honor-based violence often face life-threatening situations. Women and young people who receive death threats from family members should have access to secure shelters, emergency hotlines, and legal aid services. UNFPA has recommended the establishment of shelters, protection centres, and twenty-four-hour help lines for vulnerable individuals.⁴²
7. **Reform of the Police and Judicial Systems:** Institutional reform within the police and judiciary is necessary to effectively combat honour killings. Without impartial investigations, witness protection mechanisms, and the consistent punishment of offenders, the complete eradication of honor killings will remain difficult. Consequently, such reforms should be regarded as a central pillar of prevention strategies.⁴³ Special training programs for police officers, prosecutors, and judges, together with comprehensive risk-assessment mechanisms, should receive particular emphasis.
8. **Media and Digital Awareness:** Increasing public awareness through mass media and digital platforms is one of the most effective contemporary strategies for preventing honor killings. Public campaigns can challenge harmful social norms, promote gender equality, and encourage community engagement in preventing violence.⁴⁴
9. **Family Counseling:** Family counseling constitutes an effective social and psychological approach to preventing honor killings. In many cases, such crimes stem from poor communication within families, misunderstandings, intergenerational conflicts, social pressure, and distorted notions of honor. Concepts such as honor, social shame, and collective pressure often function as significant psychological drivers of honor-based violence.⁴⁵
10. **Religious Education:** Religious education plays a vital role in preventing honor killings. Although perpetrators often attempt to justify such acts in the name of religion, none of the world's major religions—including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, or Hinduism—endorses extrajudicial killings for the preservation of family honor. Authentic religious education promotes respect for the sanctity of human life, justice, compassion, gender dignity, and adherence to the rule of law.

Islamic Perspective on Honour Killing

Honor killing is sometimes falsely justified in the name of Islam. However, from the perspective of Islamic Shari'ah, honor killing constitutes a grave crime and an act of unlawful homicide. It fundamentally contradicts the core principles of Islam. Human life occupies a sacred and inviolable position in Islam. The Qur'an declares:

“Whoever kills an innocent person, it is as though he has killed all mankind.”⁴⁶ Consequently, Islam does not permit the taking of human life on the basis of personal anger, family honor, or social pressure. The authority to investigate crimes and impose punishments belongs exclusively to the state and a legitimate judicial system, not to individuals or family members. Even when a person is accused of adultery or any other offence, Islamic law prescribes specific legal procedures and evidentiary standards. In honor killings, however, family members often assume the roles of accuser, witness, judge, and executioner simultaneously, a practice that directly violates Islamic principles of justice and due process. Honor killing also treats women's lives as objects of family honor, whereas Islam recognizes women as independent human beings possessing inherent dignity and rights. Before Islam, pre-Islamic Arabian society practiced the burial of infant girls alive, often motivated by concerns related to shame and social honor. Islam unequivocally prohibited this barbaric custom. Some individuals mistakenly equate honor killing with punishments prescribed under Islamic law; however, the two are fundamentally different. Muslim scholars and human rights organizations have consistently condemned honor killing. Numerous Islamic thinkers have unequivocally stated that honor killing is incompatible with Shari‘ah and constitutes murder, violating both Islamic justice and fundamental human rights. There are several reasons why honor killing is haram in Islam. First, taking a human life without lawful judicial authority constitutes a major sin. Second, honor killings frequently involve violence against women and abuse of power. Third, such acts are often based on suspicion, rumors, or false accusations. Islam strongly discourages backbiting, slander, and unfounded suspicion. Honor killing is therefore a social and cultural distortion rather than a religious practice. Family honor can never supersede the value of human life. Islam places the highest importance on human dignity, justice, the sanctity of life, and the honor of women.⁴⁷ Neither the Qur'an nor the Sunnah provides any justification for killing in the name of family honour. Allah commands: “Do not kill the soul which Allah has made sacred except with legal justification.”⁴⁸ Many honour killings occur because of rumors, suspicions, false accusations, or social pressure. The Qur'an explicitly condemns such behavior: “O believers! Avoid much suspicion, for indeed some suspicion is sin.”⁴⁹ During his ‘Bidai Hajj’ the Prophet Muhammad (sm.) declared: “Your blood, your property, and your honor are sacred to one another.”⁵⁰ Violating another person's life or dignity is therefore a serious offence in Islam. The Prophet (sm.) also stated: “The first matter to be judged among people on the Day of Resurrection will be cases of bloodshed.”⁵¹ Human honor derives from integrity, justice, and moral conduct—not from violence or killing.

Existing Laws and Punishments

The number of countries that have enacted entirely separate and specific legislation on honor killing remains very limited. No international organization has published a definitive count of such countries. In most jurisdictions, honor killing is prosecuted under general homicide laws or legislation addressing gender-based violence rather than as a distinct criminal offence. Comparative legal studies frequently identify Pakistan and Sweden as notable examples in this regard.⁵² In Pakistan, legislative reforms introduced in 2004, 2006, and particularly in 2016 incorporated specific provisions addressing offences committed in the name or pretext of honour.⁵³ The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2004 formally recognized Karo-Kari as a criminal offence and incorporated such acts into the category of Qatl-i-Amd under the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC). Subsequently, the Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences in the Name or Pretext of Honor) Act, 2016 further strengthened the legal framework. Under the revised legislation, honour killing became a non-compoundable offence, and Section 311 of the PPC classified it as fasad-fil-arz, providing for mandatory life imprisonment or the death penalty.⁵⁴ In Sweden, a separate category of offence known as “Specified Honor Crimes” was introduced in 2022 as part of broader efforts to combat honor-based violence. The legislation commonly associated with the Honor Oppression Law, strengthened legal protection for victims and enhanced penalties for honor-related offences. Honor killings in Sweden are prosecuted as homicide under criminal law. Several other countries—including Denmark, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands—have adopted specialized policies, prosecutorial guidelines, and legal measures to address honor-based violence, although these do not necessarily constitute separate criminal offences specifically for honor killing.⁵⁵ Under contemporary legal systems, honor killing is generally treated as murder. International human rights law, the United Nations, and the criminal justice systems of most countries reject any justification for homicide committed in the name of family honor. In many jurisdictions, honor killing is regarded as a premeditated offence punishable by death, life imprisonment, lengthy custodial sentences, and financial penalties. The United Nations and numerous human rights organizations classify honor killing as a form of violence against women and a serious violation of human rights. Sociologist

Mark Cooney has analyzed honour killing as a form of “family punishment,” arguing that in modern states such acts of private retribution are unlawful and should be met with strict criminal sanctions imposed by the state.⁵⁶

Review

In the twenty-first century, the digital revolution and the widespread use of information technology and social media have profoundly transformed human life. However, honor killing has not been completely eradicated; rather, it has evolved into new forms. In ancient and pre-Islamic societies, honor killing was often socially accepted and, in some cases, legally sanctioned. In contrast, contemporary societies widely recognize it as a violation of human rights and an act of homicide.

Despite remarkable technological advancements, honor-based violence has not disappeared. In certain contexts, technology has even intensified social pressure by facilitating surveillance, monitoring, and control over individuals' private lives. One of the major paradoxes of the modern era is that technology functions both as a tool of oppression and as a powerful instrument for raising awareness, providing legal support, and advancing human rights advocacy.

Although the forms and methods of honor killing have changed across ancient, pre-Islamic, and contemporary digital societies, its underlying causes remain largely unchanged. Patriarchal notions of honor, the desire to control women's choices and behavior, and misguided perceptions of social prestige continue to constitute its primary foundations. Nevertheless, the promotion of human rights, the rule of law, education, and digital awareness has emerged as an effective means of preventing honor-based violence in the modern world. Historical experience demonstrates that honor can never be preserved through violence. Rather, justice, respect for human dignity, compassion, and the protection of individual freedom constitute the true hallmarks of a civilized society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To prevent and ultimately eradicate honor killing, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Effective implementation of strict and comprehensive legal provisions should be ensured.
2. Human rights education and ethical values should be incorporated into educational curricula at all levels.
3. Religious and community leaders should be actively engaged in awareness-building and prevention initiatives.
4. Women's economic, social, and educational empowerment should be strengthened.
5. Mechanisms for family dialogue, mediation, and counseling should be developed and expanded.
6. Digital literacy, online safety awareness, and cyber security measures should be enhanced.
7. Safe shelters, protection centers, and support services should be established for individuals at risk of honor-based violence.
8. The constructive use of mass media and social media should be encouraged to challenge harmful social norms and promote awareness.
9. Governments, academic institutions, and civil society organizations should undertake coordinated efforts to formulate evidence-based policies and strategies.
10. A humane, rights-based, and inclusive social culture founded on dignity, equality, and mutual respect should be fostered.

CONCLUSION

A review of human civilization reveals that honor killing is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, it represents a cruel and inhumane mechanism of social control that has manifested itself in different forms throughout history. Whether in ancient tribal societies, pre-Islamic Arabia, medieval feudal structures, or certain conservative social environments of the contemporary world, the tendency to sacrifice individual life, liberty, and human dignity in the name of so-called honor has remained a recurring pattern.

Although its external manifestations have evolved over time, the underlying ideology of honor killing has remained fundamentally unchanged. At its core lies a system of patriarchal control that prioritizes collective

notions of honor over individual rights and human dignity. Such practices are incompatible with the principles of justice, equality, and human rights that form the foundation of modern civilized societies. The collective responsibility of governments, legal institutions, educational systems, religious leaders, civil society organizations, and individuals is therefore to consign the barbaric practice of honor killing to the darkest chapters of history. A truly humane society is one in which the concept of honor is never associated with the shedding of human blood, but rather symbolizes humanity, justice, compassion, and mutual respect. Only through such a transformation can societies ensure the protection of human dignity and the realization of fundamental human rights for all.

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