
HONOUR KILLINGS: A SOCIAL AND LEGAL APPROACH

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Abstract. Honour killings are defined as the most serious subcategory of honour crimes resulting in killing the victim for cleansing family honour. The data of such killings are not collected systematically and thus, the extent of the problem is underestimated in the society. The objective of the article is to approach to honour killings from the perspectives of the criminal etiology¹ and to have a deeper insight into the issue by giving an account of a general attitude towards the problem with the purpose of prevention. The description of honour crimes is supported by the analysis of a survey, where the respondents from various countries, religions and social backgrounds express their opinion about the crime. Even though the survey is not representative enough, it illustrates that the phenomenon of an honour killing is perceived differently. The religion factor is present though it is not the key one. The study also reveals that such factors as education and integration of closed communities are the determining ones and may play the key role in prevention of such crimes.

Keywords: honour killing, family honour, women victims, crime prevention.

INTRODUCTION

An honour killing or a shameful killing is defined as a type of domestic violence. Both men and women commit and are victims of honour killings, however, most of these killings are carried out on girls and women that make a disproportionately large number of victims. The extent of such violent acts is very difficult to estimate – the data of them in most countries are not collected systematically. Many of these killings are reported and registered as suicides or accidents. And even though honour killings are often associated with the Muslim communities and/or distant past, such killings still occur all around the world. As a matter of fact, the number of honour crimes is generally decreasing, however, the problem still exists and causes serious concerns in terms of prevention. The issue is not widely discussed and analysed in some

¹ Scientific study of how and why people commit crimes.

countries, and the authors attempt to shed the light on that *terra incognita* from the point of view of the criminal law and the social attitude towards this criminological phenomenon.

The goal of the study is to have a deeper insight into the phenomenon of an honour killing from social perspectives. The issue of an honour killing is described from the view point of judiciary and supported by the analysis of an illustrative survey. The present research seeks to answer the questions whether there is a strong correlation between an honour killing and the religion, and what key reasons underlie such crimes. It is suggested that the answers to these questions might benefit a lot in terms of prevention.

The research methods are the critical analysis of the justice systems of 26 countries regarding honour crimes and a survey based on both direct and indirect questions about honour killings. The data regarding the justice system has been collected from international law reviews and legal publications. The attitudes towards honour killings have been collected through a survey. The design of the survey was based on such concepts as *honour, family arranged marriages, dating*, etc. The survey consisted of open-ended questions and closed-ended questions, as well as general questions about the background of the respondent. 111 respondents of different age groups and from 26 countries have been asked to express their opinion on the concepts related to honour killings. These answers have been used to determine the correlation between attitudes and cultural or religious groups.

The respondents do not represent the state they came from. They just illustrate a general approach to the issue expressed by educated people from different countries. This international survey seeks to provide a better understanding of the concept of an honour killing and to reveal how cultural, religious, economic and educational backgrounds shape the understanding and perception of this practice. And even though, the scope of the research is rather limited for making broad generalisations, it clearly illustrates the tendencies, which contradict some commonly accepted opinions and associations.

THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF HONOUR CRIMES

The term *honour crime* is used to designate a huge variety of violent acts against the victim who is usually but not always a woman. This violence may take the form of beating, mutilation, kidnapping, acid attacks, rapes, or even killing mentioned above (Welchman, Hossain, 2005). The common feature of all these violent acts is a specific motive to commit such killings – in the name of honour. The belief that the victim's previous acts or behaviour

have brought dishonour upon the family or community lead to honour based violence. The perpetrators are usually members of the victim's family or members of the community which the victim belongs to.

Honour crimes were mentioned for the first time by the *Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women* in the reports to the *United Nations Human Rights Council* in 1999. The phenomenon was described as “crimes against women, whereby the family kills a female relative deemed to have defiled the honour of the family” (Coomaraswamy, 1999). More specific description was made by the international non-governmental organization *Human Rights Watch*. In accordance with the organization, the term can be described as an “act of revenge usually committed by male family members against usually female family members. The often reason of this act is that victims brought dishonour upon the family by refusing to enter a family arranged marriage, being the victim of a sexual assault, accused of committing adultery or seeking a divorce”. In other words, an honour killing can be defined as the attempted murder of a family member, usually a woman, who is believed to bring shame upon the family due to behaviour which is considered as unacceptable. The relationships that are disapproved by one's family, extramarital sexual relationships are often considered as intolerable in general.

The perpetrator of an honour killing commits the murder to clean the dishonour or shame which, according to his perception, has fallen on the head of the family or community in which they live. Offenders often do not feel regret or shame for the crime committed and usually justify the action blaming the victim. A woman can become the victim for a variety of reasons. In many cases women are killed for not meeting strict standards for chastity or failing, so called, “the virginity test” during the wedding night. Women in conservative communities are supposed to stay far from any kind of sexual practice before they get married. The hymen is considered to be a socio-physical sign that represents virginity and is associated with chastity, virtue and respect. If a woman did not bleed while penetration, she is believed to fail the social test. According to the common practice, then she is taken back to her family, where a member of the family commits a murder due to bringing shame upon them. Only her bleeding to death can erase the shame brought about her failure to bleed during the wedding night. All the money and presents which were given by the family and the wedding party guests must be returned (Abu-Odeh, 1996, 2010). Therefore, the wedding night is of the phenomenal importance for women, since it includes that crucial moment which results in the society making judgments about their morality. A sexual virtue of a woman carries not only a direct market economic

value but it also symbolises the family's honour in general. From that perspective, the failure to protect honour can weaken the family's position in their social environment. Thus, the specific causes of honour are to be found at the macro level of social norms and values, not at the micro level of individual perpetrators (Gartner and McCarthy, Oberwittler and Kasselt, 2014).

The common motive for the killing is also an inappropriate dressing style from the community's and/or family's point of view or when the victim refuses to enter into an arranged marriage. A woman might suffer the violence if she is spotted conversing with the opposite gender. In this case, the reason for killing is not previous relationship of the woman, but the fact that she violated the set of norms for women in that community.

On the other hand, men can also be the victims of honour killings, when they are homosexual, bisexual or transsexual. Hence, honour killings are not only the problem for women. In these cases, most victims are young men. Unfortunately, there is no systematic documentation on the issue (Gartner and McCarthy, Oberwittler and Kasselt, 2014).

From the point of view of the honour-based perspective, the standards of behaviour are asymmetric – they are stricter for women. In parallel to this, women are much more controlled. It seems that responsibility for the family's honour is primarily women's duty and it is a woman who can bring shame upon the family by violating the principles of the community. In contrast, men may be able to retake their lost honour through their later behaviour (Baker, Gregware, Cassidy, 1999). The disproportion of female victims and different standards are so obvious that in most cases honour killings are seen as domestic violence against women.

METHODS

For better comprehension of honour crimes and before analysing several aspects related to them, it is necessary to approach to the issue from the social perspectives. Therefore, an online survey has been conducted with the purpose to reveal how honour killings are perceived and associated. The survey included several simple (yes / no) questions, as well as some open-ended questions giving the respondents some flexibility to express their opinion in more detail. The questions were direct (e.g., about justification of honour killings) or indirect (e.g., about marriages arranged by parents). All these questions were related to the issue of an honour killing. The survey was carried out among men and women from different ethnic groups, religions and cultures from all around the world. Our colleagues from foreign universities have

been asked to assist in distributing the survey among a larger number of participants. Along with this, the survey was available for public access on social media (Facebook). Finally, the data from 111 respondents have been collected and analysed. Responses have been received from 26 countries from different continents – the multicultural spectrum of responses includes Europe (the United Kingdom, Channel Island of Jersey, Lithuania, Spain, Italy, Ireland, Germany, Austria, France, Slovenia, Ukraine, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland), Africa (Uganda, Tunisia), America (the USA, Puerto Rico), and Asia (Turkey, Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, India, Vietnam). Many of the respondents are from Muslim countries, what gives a good possibility to detect the link between the religion and honour killings, if such exists.

At the beginning of the survey, respondents were asked to complete the form about their gender, age, religion and education. In terms of gender, 60 respondents are male, and 51 are female. The majority of the respondents are with higher (university) education. 67.6% of those who were questioned live in cities, 23.5% live in towns, and 9.9% are from villages. All the participants were aged between 16 and 51 years old. The largest group of respondents were students between nineteen years of age and their early thirties.

THE MEANING OF *HONOUR*

For the purpose of finding out how the concept of *honour* is perceived by different age, gender and cultural groups, the survey begins with an open-ended question such as **how they understand the concept of *honour***. Some respondents define the concept briefly, whereas others provide longer definitions and their own understanding of honour. The examples of the answers are the following:

1. *“Proud for people themselves.”* Student, 22, Turkey
2. *“It is external perception of person’s character traits.”* Attorney of Law, 25 years, Kazakhstan
3. *“It is quality of being honourable and respected.”* Student, 23, Slovakia
4. *“Is like a phone needing its battery and charger.”* Unemployed, 33, Romania
5. *“It is a set of actions and values that s self-imposed and also imposed by society to create the image of a “respectful” person in the eyes of others.”* Student, 21, Tunisia
6. *“It means to have great respect and loyalty to someone or something.”* Student, 16, the UK
7. *“That’s moral qualities, principles of the person that deserve pride and respect from others.”* Officer / Education, 26, Kazakhstan

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8. *“It means a woman's virtue or chastity for me.”* Student, 24, Vietnam
 9. *“It is a good character or a reputation for honesty and fair dealing.”* F&B Manager, 35, Romania
 10. *“The term honour is something quite archaic.”* Musician, 19, Spain
 11. *“The honour doesn't appear in my daily life often. It doesn't mean much for me.”* Civil Servant, 26, Germany
 12. *“It means you keep and fight for your principles.”* Analyst, 28, Hungary
 13. *“The term means to be above average.”* Barrister, 24, Ireland
 14. *“Honour is the term expressing an ability to act and to make decisions in a responsible and reasonable way without the fear of being ashamed.”* Student, 24, Slovakia
 15. *“I have a different perspective. But generally in my country honour means guarding the women of your family. If they run with a man, or is found doing something which the family and Society doesn't approve of, then it means her Honour is lost. Also according to people honour means women, and women's honour is in her vagina. (God forbid) but if a woman is raped by default it is termed that she has lost her Honour. In my view this entire concept of honour is quite faulty.”* Student, 24, India

As we can see from the examples of answers above, even though every answer is slightly different, the respondents share a very similar perception of the concept. Most of the participants understand the concept of *honour* as respect, dignity or pride. In general, the aspect of respect was included by all the respondents, with no matter how old they are or what country they are from. At the same time, some of those that have been questioned already specified that *honour* is defined as the chastity and virtue of a woman. Such viewpoint indicates that different genders are not treated equally.

LOSS OF HONOUR

The following question of the survey focused on the associations of the loss of honour. The question asked **whether or not they have ever felt they lost honour**. The respondents had two options of answers – “yes” or “no” and, in case of the positive answer “yes”, they were asked to describe the situation in which it happened. The majority of the respondents claim they have never experienced the loss. As a matter of fact, we cannot know whether the answers were really true. This question might involve some privacy concerns due to which the results might not be reliable. On the other hand, this might also be the truth as most of the respondents are of young age with a rather limited life experience. The illustrations of answers are here below:

16. *“When people are mean.”* Student, 24, Tunisia

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17. *“When I was bullied.”* Unemployed, 27, Pakistan
 18. *“First time having sexual relationship.”* Student, 24, Vietnam
 19. *“It happened in relationships.”* Student, 21, Ukraine
 20. *“When I lied and it was not necessary, I lied out of fear, but the person would’ve understood anyway.”* Student, 23, Slovakia
 21. *“When went against my instincts about trusting certain individuals.”* Unemployed, 24, Pakistan
 22. *“When my country was wrongly defamed.”* Student, 20, Pakistan
 23. *“I guess when someone mistreats me too much for no valid reason especially if they don’t try to see things from my side too.”* Student, 21, Tunisia
 24. *“Yes, I had before. I remember one time I was so mad to my mates for group work paper. And afterwards, I felt I lost. Then I fixed it.”* Student, 18, Azerbaijan
 25. *“Being verbally abused.”* Student, 22, Germany

Even though some respondents reported they felt shame caused by external factors related to other people, such answers which included *harassment* indicate the loss of honour as the result of the internal factors and their own behaviour, implying that they see themselves as being immoral in that particular situation.

HONOUR KILLINGS AND SOCIAL AWARENESS

The question concerning social awareness of the phenomenon of honour killings has been included in the form of the following formulation: **do they know what the honour killing phenomenon means and do they know or have heard about such cases.** This was also a yes/no question which in a way show the level of conventionality or at least the lack of information on the issue.

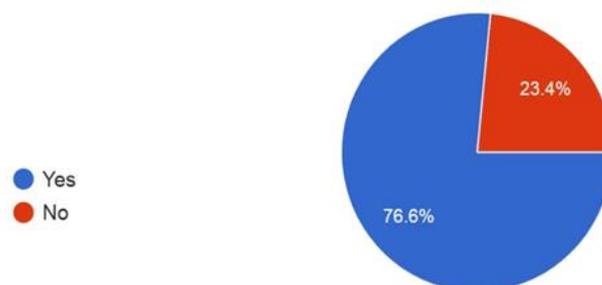


Figure 1. Have you ever heard about honour killings?

Figure 1 shows that more than three quarters – 76.6% of the respondents are aware of honour killings. In fact, many of them remembered some cases of honour killings. These varied

from general information on the news about foreign countries, from some movies or books, up to cases of such crimes in the living area of the respondent. It suggests that honour killings are still regarded as conventional practice in some regions (e.g., India, Tunisia, Uganda, Turkey, etc.) and the means of prevention are still not sufficient there. The following examples illustrate the sources of information about this abuse:

26. *“Especially in some overprotective Islam countries in the case when girls lost their virginity they are killed.”* Student, 19, Tunisia
27. *“I remember just through the news, examples from India, UK.”* Student, 25, Slovenia
28. *“I have heard about women being killed for sleeping with someone before marriage.”* Student, 24, Tunisia
29. *“Unfortunately, I can imagine it happening in many cases of dictatorship. Or in middle-east families, which violently kills their daughters, when they have been raped.”* Student, 23, Slovakia
30. *“I do not remember a certain case, except for Pushkin.”* Student, 23, Slovakia
31. *“Only from old news - connected with Caucasus.”* Officer/Education, 26, Kazakhstan
32. *“In the pre-colonial era, people from the Bakiga tribe in southern Uganda would carry out honour killings if a girl got pregnant out of wedlock. This kind of situation no longer happens.”* Student, 32, Uganda
33. *“I remember them from history (movies), nowadays in Arabic countries when some women are killed because they had “dishonoured” their families (by falling in love, by exposing sexual harassment...).”* Student, 23, Slovakia
34. *“It happened a lot in Japan, generally history of warriors, fathers after some crimes like rape on their daughters.”* Engineer, 23, Poland
35. *“In some states if India it takes place quite frequently. Mostly when girls and boys marry outside their caste and class, or if the families think their children spoilt their honour by going against the families, then honour killing takes place.”* Manager, 24, India

Many Turkish respondents remember the case which occurred in the east of Turkey. They state that *“In Turkey’s east areas, there are many events like honour killings.”*, or *“During 90’s we used to hear a lot about honour killing in the east of Turkey. But there has been always this kind of cases all over the country due to the patriarchy.”*

Other respondents also noted that the victims of honour killings are not only women, but men (mostly homosexuals) as well. For example, a 22 year old German student described the case where *“a guy had a boyfriend and when the family caught the relationship, his brother and uncle tortured him and wanted to kill him”*. Another respondent, a 21 year old student from

Tunisia, recalled a case that happened in Tunisia: “*A brother realised his brother was gay, so he and his mother killed that brother and burned him in the garden. Later the corpse started smelling and the police found it.*” Such examples show that homosexual people cannot feel safe even in their own homes as they are killed by the closest members of their family.

All the Pakistani respondents remembered about the Qandeel Baloch Case. Qandeel Baloch was a Pakistani social media celebrity and a model. She gained prominence due to her videos on social networks discussing controversial issues. On 15th July 2016, Qandeel Baloch was drugged and then choked to death by her brother Waseem Azeem while she was sleeping in her parents’ house. The killer claimed that he does not feel ashamed of killing her because she was doing videos on Facebook and dishonouring the family name. (Boone, 2017).

“A DAUGHTER IS DATING”

The fourth part of the study included a practical task. They had to **imagine a hypothetical situation that they are parents and they find out their daughter is dating** – what would be their reaction? According to the survey, the majority of respondents from different countries would be happy about the fact of dating and wish their hypothetical daughter all the best. Some of those questioned would like to meet the boyfriend or to test him. Several respondents would recommend their daughter to be careful and do not trust the person they do not know. The Pakistani respondents, however, seem to be against dating in general. They do not like the very idea of having a daughter dating someone or believe they would have a control over her with the right to make a decision about letting or forbidding her to date. They explained that the very fact of dating is not morally appropriate, especially in the cases when a girl is under 18 years of old:

36. “*I don't think it is appropriate to date unless you are engaged or are to be engaged by the decision of parents. So I will not allow her to do so.*” Student, 22, Pakistan
37. “*If she is under 18 then I would not allow her. If she is above 18 then I would meet the guy and then decide.*” Student, 21, Pakistan
38. “*Honestly, can't say so and can't be sure.*” Assistant Manager, 21, Pakistan

It is important to note that not all the Pakistani respondents shared the same critical opinion on dating – there were those that supported their hypothetical dating daughter. A rather philosophical and liberal answer was provided by a 51 year old Pakistani teacher who believes that no regulations or restrictions should be placed on people’s private choices. In his words: *“I’m against marriage in all shapes and forms. I think neither a human being nor an animal should be forced to live under any restrictions.”*

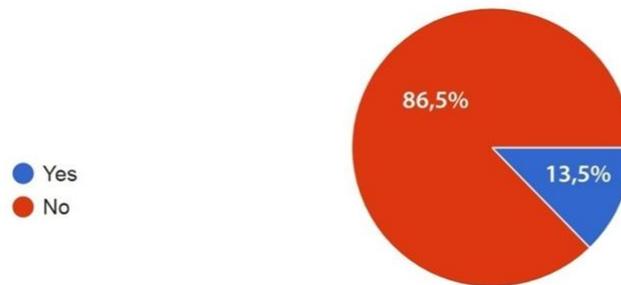


Figure 2. Is dating somebody immoral?

Following this case, the respondents have been directly asked whether they consider dating as an immoral behaviour. *Figure 2* shows that 13.5 % of respondents answered to the question positively. Such result shows that the fact of dating which is associated with a normal traditional behaviour in some countries, is not seen as such in others. These cross-cultural differences must be firmly kept in mind in order to avoid misunderstandings such as breaking local rules and restrictions, what puts at risk the dating person due to violent acts. The data also show that a great number of people are still at risk of becoming potential victims of honour crimes and there is a great platform for prevention work.

ARRANGED MARRIAGES

The issue of arranged marriages is in some indirect way related to honour crimes. Hence, the question about it was not accidentally included into the survey. The respondents were asked to express their **opinion on marriages arranged by parents**. Honour crimes usually appear in such tight-knit communities where social interests and needs have the priority and are put above the personal ones. Typically such communities are patriarchal in their structure and there exist discriminating norms for women. Some communities and religious groups treat an offspring, especially the female one, as a type of property of that family. A father or the community leaders decide the future of the children. Unfortunately, the use of force in such communities is not a rare case.

In general, the study has shown that many respondents do not support the idea of arranged marriages. They criticised this tradition, some of them even called it as being “disgusting”, “against human dignity” or “horrible”:

“I do not support them unless the parents consult with their son/daughter about it (make the decision together)” Student, 25, Slovenia

“Is a crime.” F&B Manager, 35, Romania

“It's stupid and misogynist.” Student, 20, Tunisia

“I think it is awful.” Attorney of Law, 25, Kazakhstan

“It should not happen, there should be free will for everybody.” Student, 16, United Kingdom

“I don't agree at all because I am a romantic person.” Accountant, 51, Slovakia

“This is obstacle their personal life, couple should make their own decision because that life is their life, they should care responsibility for their life.” Private Sector, 23, Azerbaijan

“Not a norm in my culture, hard to understand why it is practiced.” Clerk, 29, USA

“In modern civilizations it is unacceptable, however it had several times worked in history.” Analyst, 28, Hungary

“Marriage should be a personal choice. Parents should not make that decision.” Student, 24, Puerto Rico

“I consider it unjust and invalid.” Student, 27, Iraq

An interesting fact is that even though some respondents state that they are against arranged marriages, they still believe in a positive outcome of such practice which could lead to a happy marriage for life. This contradiction indicates that such people support the tradition of arranged marriages in one way or another:

“It's a complex situation which is very much dependent on the society cultures and customs. It is a good practice in some cases but also has its downside. But I do believe everyone should be given a choice to choose their own marriage partner.” Student, 32, Uganda

“It's better to talk first with their children. After that ask how his or her opinion.” Student, 23, Tajikistan

“It can work out in a society where it is customary, as long as it is not forced upon the couple.” Student, 22, Germany

“They are alright, Parents have the rights to suggest who they prefer to be the life partner of their child, but giving suggestions and orders are different. There should be a mutual understanding, not as if one says the other must do. That is totally wrong, both need to agree.” BPO - Assistant Manager, 21, Pakistan

Some respondents even claim that marriages arranged by parents are the best choice or the only way to get married:

“Are better than those based on feelings.” Engineer, 27, Kazakhstan

“If the people getting married are satisfied then I don't see it being wrong. If only, the bride and the groom both are happy with it.” Unemployed, 24, Pakistan

“Nothing wrong in it.” Student, 22, Pakistan

The results of the survey show that the ratio of criticising and supporting the tradition of arranged marriages is equal. Those who claim that such marriages should be arranged but not be forced are included among the supporters. The minority of the participants (mostly from Pakistan) strongly support the idea of arranged marriages. The same people claim that honour is reason enough to kill someone.

SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT THE HUMAN RIGHTS IN DISCOURSE

The rest of the study focused on the discourse of honour crimes in respect to the human rights. With the purpose to reveal social attitude (even though reported subjectively) such questions as “Does the society accept honour crimes, in your opinion?” and “Should people have the right to get married without parents’ permission?” have been asked. The participants could choose only one of the options provided. They have been asked about the social atmosphere in general regarding the acceptance of honour crimes. The authors of this study have in mind that the respondents express their personal attitude, which might not come in line with the majority of their cultural community. However, some tendencies might be seen already and they are illustrated in *Figures 3 and 4* bellow:



Figure 3. Does the society accept honour crimes?



Figure 4. Can honour be justifiable reason to kill someone?

As we can see from Figures 3 and 4, the subjects were asked the questions concerning the acceptance of honour crimes in the society (according to their personal opinion) and about honour as the reason that justifies violence. According to 62.7% of respondents, the society does not accept the honour crimes, whereas more than one third of the participants claim that the honour crimes are approved by the society. The latter group indicates that a large part of the society in general might be tolerant as far as honour crimes are concerned. The opponents of such viewpoint make only 10.9%, stating that honour does not justify killing a person. The majority of respondents (89.1%) consider killing someone for honour as something unacceptable and wrong. The number of supporters of honour crimes is unpredictably high. It is really worrying that murder is so widely accepted by the society, even though this attitude is expressed subjectively. In this light, it might be suggested that critical comments while reporting honour crimes on the media could play an important role in educating the society and altering the attitude towards this violent practice.

The survey has also shown that one fifth of the respondents disagree with the statement that women or men should have the right to marry without their family's permission. Men's marriages without the approval are slightly more acceptable in comparison to ones made by women. This proves once more again that the standards for men and women are still different in spite of long lasting attempts of human rights activists and continuous fights human right abuses.



Figure 5. Should a wife always obey her husband?

A relatively similar number of the respondents (*see* Figure 5) reported positive answers whether women should always obey their husbands. According to their subjective opinion concerning the obedience, 83.8 % of respondents answered that women should not obey their husbands, whereas 16.2% believe that a woman's duty is to obey a man. The results suggest that the obligation to obey a husband or a father is typical for traditional patriarchal communities. The majority of such respondents are from Pakistan. The study has also shown that those respondents who strongly believe that women should always obey their husbands tend to justify honour killings as well. Thus, we can see an obvious correlation between submission of wives to their husbands and the honour killing phenomenon.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has revealed that understanding the concept of *honour* is almost identical all around the world. General ideas of honour killings seem to be similar with no relation to the ethnical origin or religion. We found that those who support the idea of arranged marriages and who consider dating as an immoral behaviour are from the Muslim community with the most active advocates from Pakistan. However, many other respondents who also belong to the Muslim community disapprove honour killings. The research has revealed that such factors as higher education and employment play a more important role. University educated respondents and the employed ones from different countries, generally disapprove honour killings. They also report fewer discriminative answers regarding the right of women to freely choose the partner. Thus, even though the religion factor is present, we cannot suggest that there is a *strong* correlation between the Muslim religion and honour killings.

The socio-economic situation in communities and disintegration of tight-knit patriarchal communities seem to be the underlying reasons and the determining factors of honour killings. The analysis of the research suggests that university educated people share a very similar

viewpoint despite their cultural background. They respect human rights more and do not support discriminative traditions. Hence, education and better social conditions along with the integration of closed patriarchal communities would decrease the rate of honour killings and should be the priority means in the attempts of preventing such violence.

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