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Honour-Based Abuse: Still an invisible crime

Summary

Honour-based abuse (HBA), also known as honour crimes, involves violence and abuse, including murder, committed by people who want to defend or restore the honour of an individual or a social group, which can be a family, clan, class, caste, community, kinship or tribe. This crime may affect men, boys, lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people, but HBA is more prevalent against women and girls.

My research has focused on the empirical and intersectional understanding of what honour is underlying HBA, how it works, and how it influences people to instigate and justify violence and abuse against their family members. I did this by engaging with communities to understand these questions. As perpetrators of HBA are not outsiders, as they are generally seen to be, but, rather, their acts are committed in line with a social group or community values and norms of honour. Moreover, I used an intersectionality approach to investigate beyond a single dimension of family honour to explain HBA - by recognising other dimensions of identity, gender, sexuality, clan, caste and other social categories.

Based on more than 13 years of my research in the UK and Pakistan, I want to present the empirical understanding of honour underlying HBA, honour crimes and how to tackle them effectively. To address VAWG motivated by honour or otherwise, common approaches have been used: introducing strict laws, training police, cultural competency building of prosecutors, more shelter homes for victims, and so on. *These efforts are necessary but not sufficient to prevent HBA because HBA is supported by invisible collective social structures and narratives that create a viable environment and enable men (in some cases, women) to harm or kill women and girls for the sake of honour.* Therefore, it is imperative to engage with social groups and communities in which HBA tends to occur to dismantle these social forces and narratives and bring change from within.

Who am I? and Why am I submitting this evidence?

I am a British Pakistani. I was born and raised in a rural village in Pakistan. Since childhood, I have heard and read news stories of HBA, mainly the murders of women and girls in the name of honour, widely labelled as honour killing.

So being a professional researcher since 2009, I began my research by surveying the historical and current literature. It was noticeable from the literature that most first-hand

research was done with women and by women, which is highly important as women and girls are the primary victims of this crime. But the other side of the story is that almost 100% of HBA, violence and honour killings perpetrators are men. Those are ordinary members of a social group or community without any prior criminal record. Still, not much research has been done with men on this issue.

Being a man, I decided to do research with men as interviewing and talking to predominantly men and some women also allowed me to gain in-depth information from male participants, which might be difficult for a female researcher. Also, being a British Pakistani and sharing the same culture and language, I was considered an insider and anticipated friendliness while interacting with my research participants in the UK and Pakistan. I conducted an empirical study in 2009/10, followed by my PhD research (Oct 2015 – Sep 2021) on “uncovering community notions of honour and their relations with honour crimes and honour killings of women and girls in the UK’s Pakistani community and Pakistan”.

I have collected evidence by speaking to over 200 men and women in the UK and Pakistan, observing community events such as weddings, *Jirga* (elderly councils) and court proceedings and reviewing empirical literature, research and institutional reports and archives. I also organised community dialogues on honour and HBA, particularly forced marriages in England. These events aimed to gain community members' perspectives on honour, HBA and how to bring change led by the communities.

Forms of HBA

There are various forms of VAWG that are motivated by honour. I have produced the following list, but it is not exhausted.

- Coercive control (this form of VAWG is rooted in the social fabric of the social groups & communities where family honour is highly valued and fiercely protected. These social groups and communities do not consider coercive control a type of violence).
- Stalking
- Honour killing (an extreme form of violence motivated by honour)
- Domestic abuse
- Death threats
- Sexual, psychological & economic abuse
- Acid attacks
- Forced marriage
- Exchange marriage (*Vatta-Satta*, a Punjabi term)
- Forced suicide

- Forced abortion
- Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)
- Assault
- Blackmail
- Kidnapping
- Vani (Urdu term) is a practice in which girls are given in marriage to an aggrieved family as compensation to settle honour-related disputes
- Honour revenge rape and gang rape

Some of these forms are well understood by the Government, police and other agencies, such as forced marriages, FGM and honour killings. However, other subtle types of honour-motivated forms still need to be understood, such as coercive control, stalking, exchange marriages, forced suicide and abortions. For example, my UK data recognises that coercive control is central to the perpetration of HBA, and stalking has been a commonly used strategy to track the victims and their activities. From an early age, coercive control is used by a family to stop young people from crossing the borders (sexual, bodily, and social) and ensure adherence to acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. Hence, the control masked as obedience to parents, grandparents, extended family members or elder siblings is often established without overt violence against the victim.

Likewise, surveillance through stalking is maintained to abide by the family norms of honour by not involving in activities and behaviours considered sources of dishonour for the family. The surveillance is maintained through community networks; for example, in the Pakistani community, taxi drivers play a key role in stalking young people in their community or social group. Similarly, coercive control was enforced and reinforced through religious leaders such as Imams and Madrasa teachers.

Prevalence of HBA

HBA occurs worldwide in various cultures, some regions being hotspots, such as South Asia and the Middle East. The United Nations has identified honour crimes, including honour killings, that occur in more than 30 countries. There are no reliable statistics on the prevalence of HBA because it is not a recorded crime category in any country. However, since 2019 England and Wales police forces have started recording offences identified as so-called 'honour-based' abuse (HBA)-related.

In the year ending March 2022, there were 2,887 HBA-related offences recorded by the police in England and Wales. This was an increase of 6% compared with the year ending March 2021, with 2,725 offences recorded in England and Wales, excluding Greater

Manchester Police. In 2021 there was an increase of 18% compared with the year ending March 2020 with 2,024 HBA-related offences (Home Office 2022).

In 2015 BBC reported more than 11,000 honour-related violence incidents, including 29 honour killings and attempted killings of women and girls, which were recorded by the UK police forces from 2010 to 2014 (Talwar & Ahmad 2015). The recent figures above show that the number of HBA offences recorded by police forces in England has soared over the past five years. For example, the data collected through freedom of request suggests that HBA, including rape, death threats and assault, have increased from 884 in 2016 to 1,599 in 2021 (Siddique 2021).

In the UK, HBA is still an invisible crime as it mainly occurs in closely-knit social groups, where it is easy to put under the carpet. However, HBA incident recording has been improving for the last few years.

Characteristics of victims and perpetrators

It is hard to specify the characteristics of individual victims and perpetrators of HBA because the key attribute that makes HBA different from an intimate partner or domestic violence is its collective nature. My research found that honour operates within a close social group as a source of a family's social position within its respective social group, which can be kinship, caste, clan, class and community. Therefore, honour plays a key role in maintaining and assessing the social position of an individual, family or social group in the social structure subjected to damage through their social and moral behaviours, specifically sexual conduct.

In HBA and honour killings, the sources of dishonour refer to a woman's sexuality, including body, behaviours, clothes, communication, and virginity. These are mainly related to men exercising power and control over women and girls, restricting them from crossing three borders. These are sexual, bodily, and social and are fundamental for preserving an individual or social group's honour. Various behaviours and actions of women and girls are interpreted as sources of dishonour and shame for an individual man or a social group (see Box 2), which can lead to HBA.

Box 1: Sexual, bodily and social borders

<p>Sexual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pre-marital sex ● Extra-marital sex ● A woman or girl being raped ● Getting pregnant from the sexual relationship ● Having a boyfriend 	<p>Bodily</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Wearing revealing/tight clothes ● No proper purdah ● Adopting a western lifestyle by migrant women and girls living in the Western countries
<p>Social</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Asking for a share in the inheritance ● Disobedience to parents and/or family men ● Working outside of the home ● Moving away from their family house before marriage ● Going out without the permission of parents or other male members of a family ● Talking to an unrelated man ● Using mobile phone ● Using social media 	<p>Social predominantly related to marriage</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Marriage: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ without consent of family ○ outside one's social group (concerned norm circles) ○ by eloping with a man of her own or another social group ○ with a man from a lower caste ○ with a non-Muslim man ● Asking for a divorce ● Saying no to cousin's marriage ● Complaint to relevant authorities against parents who tried to arrange a forced marriage

Given the collective nature of HBA, my research has identified distinct characteristics of social groups and communities where HBA tends to occur. Thus, it is slightly easy to identify them and direct social interventions to them for HBA prevention. My research found the following characteristics of such groups:

1. A social group can be a family, clan, caste, tribe, lineage, or kinship group encircled around honour norms. They strongly adhere to customary laws and other unwritten codes wherever they live.
2. The social groups perceive that honour is a natural trait of men, which means the nature of honour is divine and genetic; thus, a man's power to defend his family's honour is just and justified. This belief views HBA as an inevitable behaviour and the

notions of honour as fixed. Therefore, honour-motivated harmful practices such as forced marriage or honour killing have collective explicit or implicit support.

3. The group consists of people and families who know each other and are also related through blood ties, marriage, lineage or belonging to the same clan or caste group. Therefore, distance doesn't matter for these groups, the group members' individuals or families can live in different countries, but their major concern is keeping family honour intact.
4. These groups mainly try to live in the same area, such as streets, neighbourhoods, cities or towns. This type of resident arrangement facilitates them to put issues under the carpet or resolve matters through community gatherings and keep an eye on women and girls when they go out and about.
5. These groups subscribed to social structures, such as *Jirga* or *panchayat* (council of older men) in Pakistan and Afghanistan, "*khap panchayats*" (caste-based councils) in India and *Sulha* (a traditional system used for reconciliation of differences) in Israel, Palestine and other Middle Eastern countries. These structures settle disputes of honour violence and killings out of the courts and sometimes sanction honour killings. The anecdotes suggest that families from these countries or regions living in the UK sometimes settle disputes such as divorce, battering, rape, incest and other VAWG disputes through these structures.

HBA under the pretext of upholding cultural norms

The honour system is based on the narrative that women and girls are carriers of family honour, which is considered to be a precious social resource that serves three essential purposes: to be a source of social position; a means to preserve social differentials and a social property that has monetary value as well. Given the social, cultural, and economic value of honour that lies with women and girls, the system has constructed the rules and practices to protect itself.

My research found that family honour is, at root, male honour, which works at different levels – in a social group or a community through the patriarchal system called the honour system. The system is customary and supported by informal social structures such as clan, caste, kinship, community etc. These structures not only condone HBA but provide infrastructure to the honour system to manifest its power through abuse, violence and killings. Based on my research findings, I argue that in many social groups, the honour system supported by such structures exists in the UK. Still, due to the UK's legal structures, people from the wider social group (biradri, clan, caste, or community) fear they may go to prison for supporting someone in illegal activity. Therefore, many women of Pakistani origin living in Western

countries have been taken or invited to Pakistan for a family visit and killed or forcibly married there to save the so-called family honour. An example was Samia Shahid, a 28-year-old woman from Bradford murdered by her ex-husband in Pakistan in 2016.

The key feature of the notion of honour in the context of HBA is that it operates within a close social group, an extended family, clan, community, caste or kinship group. These features are common in the UK's ethnic minority background groups such as Pakistani-Kashmiris, Kurdish and Turkish groups. It is also reported HBA is more prevalent in these groups. In HBA, including honour killing, honour is considered "a highly valued and fiercely protected currency in many social groups and communities across cultures that consider women and girls the objects of the currency".

The data show honour is a system of surveillance, normalisation, and examination, aimed at producing harmless, non-rebellious, passive female bodies. The women and girls who follow the rules should be satisfied with a life conforming to the normalised standards of being chaste, modest, and obedient. In turn, such a woman is perceived as a vessel of honour of an individual man or wider group, which can be a family, lineage, kinship, community, or tribe. In contrast, women and girls who do not conform to the prescribed rules and norms are considered defiant, disobedient, and deviant. To control non-conforming women and girls, the actors use various social practices, from forced marriages to honour killings, under the auspices of the honour system. I argue that any form of VAWG motivated by honour is not an isolated individual behaviour; instead, it is a social practice rooted in patriarchal cultures and operates within a tight social group as a tool to exercise power and control over women and girls.

Challenges faced by victims of HBA in seeking support

The hypersensitivity attached to HBA is the key barrier to preventing HBA and victims from seeking support. How we understand and frame a problem implies how the problem is solved. The cultural framing that is condoned by a specific culture type known as 'honour culture', which authorises its members, mainly males, to resort to abuse, violence and murders to save the family honour, has made HBA a culturally sensitive problem. So, when honour crimes are dismissed as a cultural issue, the communities in which it prevails are stigmatised, and those who suffer violence also face their suffering being brushed off as a cultural problem. The sensitivity allows the perpetrator to use further coercion to prevent the victim from seeking help and intimidate local agencies of the state to stop them from pursuing and prosecuting these violent crimes. This framing has stigmatised some specific cultures and communities instead of violent behaviours and actions. In turn, HBA has become a politically charged and hypersensitive issue creating obstacles to preventing them.

Police response to HBA

Recent reports suggest that the police response to HBA has improved but needs to be enhanced. It could be improved by increasing the understanding of the concepts and social structures that provide a conducive environment for perpetrators of HBA and prevent victims from seeking support or protection.

Preventing HBA

In the UK, cultural and religious sensitivity attached to HBA may be reduced by focusing on specific social groups with specific social forces that support HBA instead of certain cultures and communities. This would pave the way for community engagement and more empirical research. This could be achieved by adopting the following,

- Encourage conscious efforts to engage targeted social groups to bring change from within. For example, the historical records show two practices similar to HBA, footbinding in China and wife immolation in India; both were outlawed through the change from within. There was huge external pressure and condemnation on these nations, like today, for HBA that may have provided momentum. But the actual game changer has been the movements against these problems led by the local people. Like in China, thousands of indigenous anti-footbinding pledged groups cropped up with a promise that there would be no more footbinding. As a result, the practice was wiped out swiftly. My research suggests that in the UK, there is a scope for anti-HBA, or anti-forced marriage, pledged groups that can lead to sustainable change.
- To ensure a change in attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours of community members, particularly young people, about honour notions.
- To bring a clear understanding of young people concerning family honour and their communication skills to discuss these sensitive issues in a family.

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