



**'Honor Killings'
Women killed without honor**



*By: Mervat Abu Jamea'

He said to the police, " I saw a man in her bedroom". Those words, repeated by my father 12 years ago, are still raging and grinding in my head like an old mill. A man in a village nearby to us had killed his wife using a sharp tool, because of custom.

My father did not agree with this, but all the men in the neighborhood who discussed the incident supported what he had done, in spite of all they knew about the background of this crime and that the woman was blameless. Regardless of the cruel slaughter of the woman, the men defended the man's behavior as the right thing for a manly man to do.

A few months later, the murdering husband was released from prison, and returned to life as usual, while his

wife rotted underground, as if nothing had happened. He was like many who have committed the same crime, who fled punishment and then carried on with their lives as usual.

People in my village forgot the incident, but it is seared in my memory, it comes back to me whenever I hear of another murder. Another 'honor' killing carried out for the same sort of reason: custom, a dispute over land, a woman's behavior misjudged, or just rumors within societies governed by a custom which is based on sin and shame and is especially harsh towards women.

The crime of so-called 'honor' killing is the height of violence against women. The crimes are usually committed by a family member, in the absence of any legal deterrent or sanction. There is no protection in the law for the victims. It is a disturbing phenomenon in Arab societies in general and Palestinian society in particular, which is dominated by men and their interests.

Despite the fact that societies are more economically developed, in recent years, this type of crime has dramatically increased to the point of being out of control. It is fueled by political and economic instability, lawlessness and a lack of security and it is taking us back to the ages of ignorance, where the dignity of women is violated.

This issue has been publicly discussed and condemned by many in Palestinian society, and particularly in the Gaza Strip, which is a particularly complex and isolated community, where women's behavior defines the honor of the family, the village and society as a whole. Yet this practice still continues without any check.

So far, there are no solid statistics on the killing of women for so-called 'honor', figures supplied by women's and other human rights organizations in Palestine are not accurate and sometimes there are contradictory accounts, because of the sensitivity of the subject. There have been cases of killings of women recorded as suicide or other reasons for fear of the shadow of shame, which pursues the family in a society that enshrines Honor.

42 women died in 'honor' killings between 2003 and 2009 in Palestine, and most cases were in the Gaza Strip, where the living conditions have seriously deteriorated on all levels since Hamas won legislative elections in 2006. 2007 was the worst year when an increase in the number of cases of 'honor' killings was recorded. 13 women were killed in Palestine, ten of the cases in the

Gaza Strip and three women in the West Bank. 2005 witnessed the killing of 11 women and in 2008 there were 3 cases recorded in the Gaza Strip.

Since the beginning of 2009, 6 women were killed in 'honor' killings, 1 in the West Bank and the rest were from the Gaza Strip.

The killing of women for reasons of so-called 'honor' is a flagrant violation of their right to life, and represents a complete disregard of their human rights, which are guaranteed by international law and local conventions. It is a result of the control and domination of women by men. Any step taken by women to escape this control is used to justify giving the maximum punishment.

In the absence of legal deterrence, the law of the jungle prevails and it is usually accepted by the citizens, because in recent years respect for the law has been undermined amid a multiplication of enforcement bodies, each without a clear mandate or authority.

On the other hand, there is a deficiency in the Palestinian law too. There is no explicit provision for the protection of women against the so-called 'honor' killings. In the West Bank, the applicable law is the Jordanian Penal Code 1961, In the Gaza Strip, the Ottoman Penal Code dating from 1936 applies. This treats a killing for 'honor' as an extenuating circumstance in the commission of murder, and so sentences are lenient. Under the draft penal code in the Palestinian Territories 2003, 'honor' killing is not even a crime. It argues that a man can kill a woman on mere suspicion, without evidence or proof, and that he is acting in self-defence. It sets more lenient sentences for men than women in this case, another example of the law failing to protect women.

This is particularly surprising because Islamic Shariah is the basis for all Palestinian laws, yet some parts of the 2003 draft Penal Code are quite contrary to Shariah. The Islamic religion, which preserves the dignity of women, requires proof of the crime of adultery and prostitution from four witnesses before either of the accused can be found guilty.

The practice of 'honor' killing hinders the progress of women and their participation in developing their communities. It sows fear in the hearts of women and restricts their movement and creativity, holding them back from achieving their real potential in the various spheres of life.

So, everyone should play a part to help us move towards equity for women by developing laws which truly respond to the needs of the women and the community.

References:

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