

Drop the H-Word: #CallItFemicide

Hasnaa Mokhtar

Why is it when a military personnel kills, he is awarded a badge of “good honor” and when a man murders in the name of honor, he is condemned, I asked my Khaleeji friend one day. When did the concept of sharaf (honor) become a symbol correlating with violence and sexuality? Most importantly, how is labeling the murders of women as “honor killings” stopping the violence and changing patriarchal societal and institutional ideas about women, gender, and oppression?

Recently in Kuwait, a number of femicide — or the intentional killing of women or girls because of their gender — cases shook the community prompting a public debate via social media and lots of outrage. In December 2020, Shaikha Alajmi was murdered by her brother allegedly for working as a security guard (Prime Time Zone, 2021; Ayoubi, 2021). In September 2020, Fatima Ali Alajmi was shot to death by her brother while she was in the hospital (Times Kuwait, 2020; Ayoubi, 2021). She was receiving medical treatment after another brother attempted to kill her allegedly due to family disputes or marriage problems. The little information the media published neither revealed enough details to understand the complexity of each case nor cited medical or legal experts involved in the crimes to verify claims. Yet activists and lobbyists slammed the label “honor killings” to the murders (Debre, 2021; Al Mulla 2020), framing the incidents as attempts to protect a cultural notion of family honor. Mainstream media outlets (The Economist, 2021; Reuters, 2021) have also deployed the label to shame Arab governments for not doing enough to end “honor killings.” While there’s truth to that, this focus perpetuates the belief that individuals of certain cultures, classes, and backgrounds are inherently misogynistic and are guided by convictions of honor and shame unlike members of the educated, civilized elite.

According to the first census of femicide (Broom; 2020), six women are killed every hour by men globally, mostly by male family members or partners. Annually, a total of 50,000 women worldwide are murdered by men they know and trust. As the numbers indicate, femicide is not an exceptional plight to a certain race, class, region, or nationality. However, the public discussion on gender-based violence in the Arabian Peninsula remains trapped within shallow and simplistic analyses of blaming traditions and honor rather than address the systematic roots of violence.

In a study that analyzed 486 articles from three major Canadian newspapers comparing murder cases labeled “honor killings” with “family spousal murders”, Allie Shier and Eman Shor (2015) provide evidence that “honor killings” is a term deployed by Western media to describe femicide cases that Muslims with certain ethnic and racial backgrounds commit. They discuss how the term is controversial and that “what constitutes an honor killing is often fluid, fuzzy, and highly contextual” (Sheir and Shor, 2015, p. 1164).

During an interview I conducted in Kuwait in 2019, as part of my doctoral research, with an upper-class Kuwaiti advocate about her anti-violence intervention, she stated that the privileged class she belonged to supported her cause morally. “But they didn’t want their names associated with it,” she explained to me. “There’s fear. They don’t want to be linked with anything related to sharaf, or anything that has sex connotations” (Personal Interview, 2019). She was referencing here people from specific tribal or economically disadvantaged social settings. This narrative presents a dichotomy between the aggressors’ savage culture and traditions and the modern elites. Such framing of the problem upholds the notion that people of certain tribes or classes are born patriarchal to defend their honor and the same doesn’t apply to the upper-class.

Scholars and experts have stated that gender-based violence is a highly changeable problem that must be examined in relation to other forms of invisible and systematic violence such as sexism, racism, and classism (Wies and Haldane, 2011). Persisting in the misuse of the “honor killing” description draws attention away from the underlying brutality of patriarchy and the culturally established sense of “guardianship” and right (or even obligation) to police and control women’s bodies, behaviors, and

decisions. Insisting on attaching the label honor to these crimes instead of calling it for what it is, femicide, has ramifications that breed racism, classism, orientalism, and more harm. Violence doesn't happen in a vacuum. Shaming people of certain backgrounds is a form of violence. This narrative isn't helping anyone.

"Everyone is damaging the cause. Those who committed the crimes. Those who did not report the crimes with honesty. Lawyers who were seeking fame. Women's groups who were adding such cases to their list to increase support without investigation and using just loud voices to increase tension," said my Kuwaiti colleague Aw. Al-Qahtani when I asked her about the murders. Violence is about exerting power and control over another. A racist and selective account about its prevalence and motives shuts down opportunities for meaningful anti-violence intervention policies. Advocates cannot fight femicide with racism or classism because those are likely to reinforce misogynistic ideals within individual households and larger institutions.

Drawing attention to the misogyny motivating lethal crimes against women is not a luxury anymore. The Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability released the report #CallItFemicide in 2020 discussing the resistance to acknowledge the role of patriarchy in the murders of women and reasons behind that resistance. "...because it is not just an individual characteristic. It is also a characteristic of our patriarchal social structures and systems such as the police, courts, corrections, our governments, our education system, our health care systems, and our media. It is part of the fabric of the everyday life of women and girls" (#CallItFemicide, 2020, p. 9).

According to the Global Study on Homicide conducted by the UN (2019), the killing of women rarely happens arbitrarily. Perpetrators of femicide take advantage of cultural stereotypes of women being "weak" and "subordinates" when determining to kill a woman to uphold ideas of male dominance, discrimination, and indifference to women's lives. Often, there is always a history of violence in the relationship that precedes the murder. Calling these crimes anything other than femicide masks the web of brutal factors that lead to such fatal injustices against women.

The point of critiquing the label of "honor killings" is not to debate whether people kill in the name of sharaf or not. The goal is to question whether such framing of a global epidemic that takes the lives of women is helpful or useful at all. It definitely is beneficial to people with bigoted and politicized agendas. But not to people who are struggling at the intersection of layers of injustice. Black and Indigenous feminists have been calling for alternative models of restorative and transformational justice that address structural violence and its connection to femicide. They have also been advocating for solutions that are grounded in compassion and kindness that would lead to healing and to actual social change rather than carceral and Band-Aid fixes. To center survivors' needs and to hold perpetrators accountable with the aim of changing behaviors, not just shaming and criminalizing them.

But most importantly, anti-violence advocates must drop the H-Word and name these murders for what they are: femicide. This year, the Global 16 Days Campaign, which raises awareness about violence against women, is focusing on femicide to highlight its prevalence and the lack of proper discourse around the injustice globally. It is time to question the aspects of power that get stabilized by the ongoing use of the word honor to describe the brutal murders of women by misogynistic men simply because they can. It is also time to reclaim the concept of honor from the hands of murderers and racists alike. Echoing the iconic feminist Nawal Elsaadawi, let's redeem honor as, "...Honesty, honesty of thinking, honesty of feelings, and honesty of actions. An honest person is the one who does not live a double life; one in public and the other in secrecy" (Elsaadawi, 1974, p. 150).

Hasnaa Mokhtar is the Postdoctoral Associate at Rutgers University's Center for Women's Global Leadership. She holds a Ph.D. from Clark University. She is a scholar, researcher, and activist, with expertise on the Arabian Gulf, focusing on narratives of Muslim survivors of gender-based violence. Hasnaa served as the executive director of the Center for Nonviolent Solutions in Worcester, MA, and more recently as the special program director at Peaceful Families Project. www.hasnaamokhtar.com

References

1. Al Mulla, Yasmena. (2020). "Kuwait: Pregnant woman shot dead by Brother inside hospital ICU." Gulf News. <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-pregnant-woman-shot-dead-by-brother-inside-hospital-icu-1.73760070>
2. Ayoubi, Nur. (2021). "Kuwait: Outrage after woman killed following rejection of marriage proposal." Middle East Eye. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/kuwait-woman-killing-outrage-after-rejecting-marriage-proposal>
3. Broom, Douglas. (2020). "As the UK publishes its first census of women killed by men, here's a global look at the problem." World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/11/violence-against-women-femicide-census/>
4. #CallItFemicide. (2020). "Understanding sex/gender-related killings of women and girls in Canada." Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability. <https://femicideinCanada.ca/callitfemicide2020.pdf>
5. Debre, Isabel. (2021). "Kuwait's #MeToo Moment: Women Denounce Harassment Violence." Bloomberg. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-13/kuwait-s-metoo-moment-women-denounce-harassment-violence>
6. Declarations of Truth. (2021). WomenatthecenterE. https://www.womenatthecentre.com/declarations-of-truth/?fbclid=IwAR0jZBAnkohC0GNeiQu_FsdbbQfpY_zN6SxIUDBWwqL5Wur2BZvj07yj4N8
7. Elsaadawi, Nawal. (1974). The Origin is a Female.
8. UNODC. (2019). "Global Study on Homicide. Gender-related killing of women and girls." United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. UNODC Research. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet_5.pdf
9. Prime Time Zone. (2021). "Angered by what happened with Sheikha Al-Ajami's brother, who stabbed her! | A nation is tweeting out of tune." <https://primetimezone.com/world/gulf-news/angered-by-what-happened-with-sheikha-al-ajamis-brother-who-stabbed-her-a-nation-is-tweeting-out-of-tune/>
10. Reuters. (2021). "Women's murder by alleged harasser in Kuwait sparks protest, outrage." <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/womans-murder-by-alleged-harasser-kuwait-sparks-protest-outrage-2021-04-22/>
11. Shier A, Shor E. (2016). "Shades of Foreign Evil": "Honor Killings" and "Family Murders" in the Canadian Press. *Violence Against Women*. 22(10):1163-1188. doi:10.1177/1077801215621176
12. Wies and Haldane (Ed.). (2011). *Anthropology at the Front Lines of Gender-Based Violence*. Vanderbilt University Press.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the beliefs and positions of the Regional Program of the Gulf States at Konrad- Adenauer-Stiftung.

Contact Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

Regional Programme Gulf States

Fabian Blumberg
Representative to the Gulf States
Email: fabian.blumberg@kas.de

Dr. Mohammad Yaghi
Research Fellow and Programme Manager
Email: mohammad.yaghi@kas.de