

# HONOUR KILLINGS - ISSUE SHEET

*“The victims [of honour killings in Pakistan] range from pre-pubescent girls to grandmothers. They are usually killed on the mere allegation of having entered 'illicit' sexual relationships. They are never given an opportunity to give their version of the allegation as there is no point in doing so – the allegation alone is enough to defile a man's honour and therefore enough to justify the killing of the woman.”<sup>1</sup>*

## What is an Honour Killing?

An honour killing is a form of violence against women that occurs in the family or community. Honour killing is a human rights violation and a crime, although those responsible for such crimes are typically not held fully accountable by the state. “Honour crimes” are acts of violence committed primarily against women who are considered to have brought shame on their family or community. They occur in the context of social customs within communities that control every aspect of women’s lives, including their bodies, speech and behavior. When such customs are seen to be violated, the family “honour” has been violated, and must be restored. Under these circumstances, “honour” is restored by the death of the person responsible for violating it. “Honour crimes” take various forms including stoning, shooting, burning or killing with axes. These crimes often result in death. Honour killings take place around the world.

## Why are “Honour” Killings carried out?

Women are killed or attacked for supposed “illicit” relationships, for marrying men outside the approval or decision-making of their families, for seeking or getting a divorce, and in some cases, even when they are victims of sexual violence. Honour killings may also occur as a way of settling disputes that the victim’s family is involved in or as a way for a family to redeem itself after being “dishonored.” The violation of the “honour” of a woman’s relatives or partners may not actually have taken place, often the accusation or allegation of having entered an “illicit” sexual relationship is enough to justify the killing of the woman. Women are rarely given the opportunity to present their version of the allegation.

**Iraq:** Du’a Khalil Aswad, a 17-year-old girl, was publicly stoned to death for an "honour crime" in the town of Bahzan, near the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, on 7 April 2007. Du'a Khalil Aswad was a member of the minority non-Muslim Yezidi community in Iraq and had been involved in a relationship with a Muslim boy. She had been missing from her home for one night. She was reportedly accused of converting to Islam but her relatives denied this was the case. While she was being given shelter in the house of a Yezidi tribal leader in Bahzan, a crowd of men stormed the house and dragged her outside. Up to eight or nine men, including some of her relatives, stoned her to death in the presence of hundreds of people, some of whom were recording the incident on their mobile phones. Local security forces were reported to have witnessed the killing, but failed to intervene to prevent the stoning or arrest those responsible.

<sup>1</sup> *Pakistan: Honour Killings of Girls and Women.* AI Index: ASA 33/018/1999



## How often do Honour Killings take place?

Hundreds of women and girls are killed every year for dishonoring their family or community, and honour killings occur in countries around the world. In Jordan, in 2007, 17 women were reported to have died as a result of honour killings. In Pakistan, at least 631 women and girls died in honour killings in the first eight months of 2003. Honour killings have been recently documented in Jordan, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, Iran and Iraq. These crimes also take place in Latin America where they are called “crimes of passion.” The official number of honour killings that take place each year is not fully known, as many such crimes are not reported or go unpunished, and they are not always categorized as “honour crimes”.

## Who is responsible for protecting women from Honour Killings

In many cases of honour killings, law enforcement officials and the judicial systems impose lenient punishments for those who commit these crimes. Laws provide loopholes that mean that perpetrators of honour killings do not receive punishment, or receive light sentences. In Jordan, Article 98 of the Penal Code says that if a crime is committed in “a fit of fury caused by an unlawful or dangerous act on the part of the victim” the perpetrator shall benefit from a reduced penalty. In two separate cases in 2008, two men received a sentence of a few months imprisonment for the murder of their female relatives on the basis that the women had violated their “honour”.

States are responsible for the protection and promotion of the rights of women in their countries. They are responsible for preventing and punishing violence against women when it is committed by the state and when it is committed by private actors. In the case of honour killings, the state is responsible for ensuring that perpetrators of these crimes are brought to justice, and that they don't receive lesser punishments than if the crime were not a “crime of honour”. The difference in the type of punishment for violence against women, and the fact that violence against women often goes unpunished, is discriminatory and a violation of international law.

The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women requires states to “take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women.” Clearly, the state is responsible for protecting women from violence, and for taking action to make sure that honour killings are treated as serious crimes under the law, and in practice.

## What You Should Know

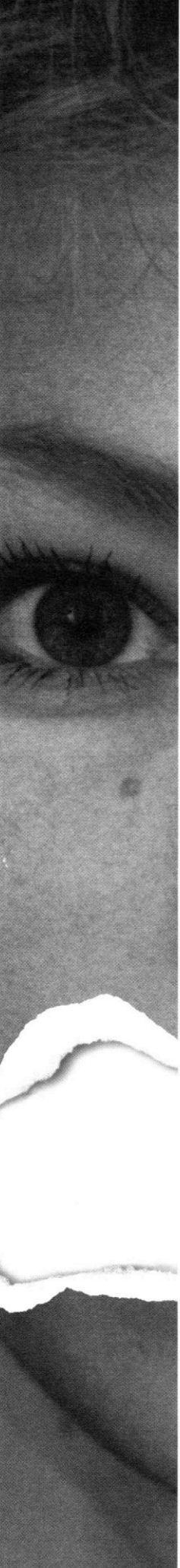
- Honour killings enforce the subjugation of women's freedom to the power of husbands and other male authorities.

**Each year, hundreds of women and girls are murdered in Pakistan in the name of honour.**

Samia Sarwar, a 36-year-old Pakistani woman, was murdered for trying to escape an abusive marriage. At the instigation of her own parents, she was shot dead in her lawyer's office in Lahore, Pakistan on April 6, 1999. Although the circumstances of her death are well known, the police have yet to lay charges.







- Honour killings usually occur because of a rumor, allegation, suspicion or proof of sexual impropriety by the victim.
- The “honour” considered to be violated is that of the family, including either a male partner, or male relatives of the victim.
- Social pressures force a man to publicly demonstrate that he has the power to protect his family honour by killing those who damage it.
- Honour killings have been performed by women against their daughters, sisters or daughters-in-law. In some cases, men are also killed, particularly when they are associated with a woman accused of an “honour crime”.
- Perpetrators of honour killings are rarely brought to justice; sometimes they are even given sanctuary by their community.

## “Honour” Killings Around the World

- Like most violent crimes against women and girls, the number of reported cases may only represent a small fraction of actual cases.
- Women who are mentally challenged or marginalized are particularly vulnerable. In Pakistan, a 16 year old mentally challenged girl was killed for being raped.
- Amnesty International’s 2007 Report on Afghanistan noted that ‘legal reforms designed to protect women have not been implemented and...[t]here has been a rise in cases of "honour" killings of women.’
- Amnesty International’s 2007 Report on Pakistan states that over the past year “[h]onour’ killings, domestic violence including maiming and harmful traditional practices continued at a high level. Jirgas, councils of elders, which the Sindh High Court had banned in 2004, continued to "sentence" girls and women to cruel punishments.”
- In Iraq in 2000 and 2002, the Kurdish authorities introduced amendments to the law, but incidents of "honour crimes" continue to be reported. In its statement of 1 May, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) said there had been 40 convictions for honour killings in the Kurdistan region and that at least 24 other cases are pending.
- Since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, violence in Iraq has increased, including a sharp rise in "honour crimes" against women.

## What You Can Do

- Support Amnesty International’s campaign to Stop Violence Against Women by becoming a member. Call 1-800-Amnesty, or go to: [www.amnesty.ca/members](http://www.amnesty.ca/members)
- Join the Action Network on Women’s Human Rights (ANWHR), which meets every 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday at the AI Toronto office. Visit [www.anwhr.ca](http://www.anwhr.ca) for more details.
- Visit Amnesty International’s Women’s Human Rights Blog at [www.amnesty.ca/women](http://www.amnesty.ca/women) to find out about our work on women’s human rights and to take action online.
- Stop by the Toronto Regional Office to learn more and get involved. 14 Dundonald Street, open Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, 10:00 am to 5:00 pm.

