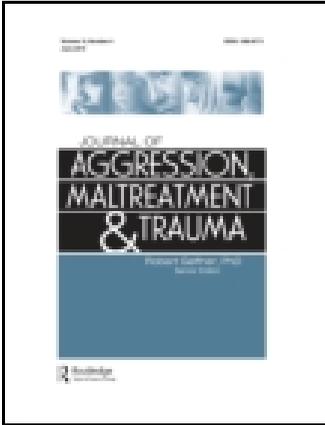


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Policy Responses to Honor-Based Violence: A Cultural or National Problem?

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POLICY ISSUES AND RESPONSES TO VIOLENCE

Policy Responses to Honor-Based Violence: A Cultural or National Problem?

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The UK government has consistently sidelined honor-based violence from mainstream political discourse and has chosen to present the issue as a problem that is embedded in the culture of minority communities. This inevitably leads to a sense of heightened cultural sensitivity and the pressure to be viewed as culturally competent. It is argued that for honor-based violence to be managed effectively, it must first be dissociated from culture and from mainstream domestic violence discourse and recognized as a national problem that requires serious and specific policy intervention. Although it is acknowledged that all policy responses to complex social problems should reflect multicultural sensitivity, we argue in this critical review that this should not become an excuse for nonintervention.

KEYWORDS *domestic violence, honor-based violence, multiculturalism, patriarchy, police, religion, UK government*

Honor-based violence (HBV) is now recognized as a topical and persistent issue and a common occurrence within a variety of cultures and communities in the United Kingdom (Rupa, 2008; Samad, 2010). At least 5,000 individuals are killed in the name of “honor” around the world each year (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2009) with about 12 being killed annually in the UK (Brandon & Hafez, 2008). Thousands more face other forms of HBV,

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including beatings, imprisonment, and forced marriages. However, reliable and up-to-date data on the scale of HBV in the UK and similar countries with large immigrant populations are unavailable. This is due to the fact that it is practically impossible to precisely assess the number of so-called honor crimes. The feeling of shame and threats from within the community and the fact that victims might be emotionally or economically dependent on the aggressor contribute to the low reporting of these crimes (Gill, Begikhani, & Hague, 2012). Moreover, HBV is a hidden problem with the criminal justice system either not detecting the motive for this violence or mistaking killings as a consequence of honor as murders or suicides (Belfrage, Strand, Ekman, & Hasselborg, 2012).

HBV is defined as “a crime or incident which has or may be committed to protect or defend the honour of the family/community” (Association of Chief Police Officers of England, Wales and Northern Ireland [ACPO], 2010, p. 5). It incorporates a range of violent behaviors from forced marriage and female genital mutilation (Gill, 2006) to killings (Brandon & Hafez, 2008). Although the UK government agrees with the ACPO (2010) definition of HBV, they advocate caution in the use of the word *honor* in referring to HBV, and maintain that there is not, and indeed cannot be, any honor or justification for the abuse of the human rights of others (House of Commons Home Affairs Committee Report [HACR] 2008). Consequently, in referring to HBV, the government advocates the use of the phrase “so-called honour based violence” (HACR, 2008). The evident discomfort expressed by the UK government over the association of violence with honor is reflected in the consequent development of policy and also influences how HBV is addressed in practice. It also illustrates the tension the UK government faces in attempting to balance cultural competency and multiracial sensitivity with the acknowledgment that HBV is a moral travesty. This is similarly the case in the United States and other countries with large immigrant populations such as France and Germany. In these countries, state provision of appropriate services and awareness of the issue is patchy at best and indicative of a cultural relativism that fails to treat HBV with the same rigor as abuses within mainstream society (Honour Based Violence Awareness Network, 2013).

Much has been said about the terminology used to collectively describe the various forms of violence committed in the misplaced and misguided notions of so-called honor and dishonor. There is, of course, no honor in the abuse of individuals, but we contend that, however unacceptable in its interpretation, the justification and defense applied by perpetrators of such related acts of violence (and their supporters) is honor. Consequently, for the purpose of this article, HBV will be used when discussing and critiquing violence perpetrated in the pretext of honor. This is also in keeping with the terminology used by academics across the world in relation to such violence (Feldman, 2010; Gill, 2006; Siddiqui, 2007). The very fact that the term *honor-based violence* has evoked concern due to the implication of what

honor represents highlights the problem of constructing meaning through language and how this inevitably becomes a problem for policymakers, specifically in relation to the interpretation of policy into action. This critical literature review aims to outline some of the key arguments related to the way in which HBV is understood and managed and also examine the way in which current policy attempts to accommodate the management of HBV in an increasingly culturally sensitive society.

THE IMPACT OF CULTURE AND PATRIARCHY ON HONOR-BASED VIOLENCE

In 1998, Rukshana Naz was killed by her mother and brother for refusing to stay in her marriage to a cousin in Pakistan and by becoming pregnant by her lover in the United Kingdom. Convicted of her murder, her brother attempted to make a “cultural defence,” arguing in mitigation that he had been provoked into killing his sister because she had brought shame and dishonour to the family. (Hall, 1999, p. 1)

This extract illustrates the reality of how honor is interpreted at the expense of a life. Honor is perceived as an evaluation of an individual's trustworthiness and social status based on that individual's espousals and actions (Ama, 2009). In this sense, honor is believed to be exactly what determines a person's character regardless of whether or not the person reflects honesty, respect, integrity, or fairness. The notion of honor also underpins marriage institutions in communities where acts of HBV are perpetrated, and the mechanism under which this violence is perpetrated is intertwined with culture, particularly those cultures that view women as a commodity and a reflection of societal status (Gill et al., 2012). This concept of honor is not specifically synonymous with a particular culture or society. Across Europe there are variations of protecting honor within the family. However, the more extreme and overtly articulated forms of sexualized honor are generally associated with the immigrant population and their descendants from the Middle East and South Asia. The notion of honor among this group is distinctive because it is openly expressed and is used as much in a structural capacity, for the organization of communities, as it is in the context of religious and cultural identity (Brandon & Hafez, 2008).

There are, however, several arguments in support of a beneficial effect of the concept of honor. For some sections within minority communities, notions of honor have positive connotations, and are not about sexual or gender control, but about respecting a sense of personal honor, dignity, and integrity (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Some of the advantages of honor are identified as increased security and prospects for offspring, thus ensuring future provision for the family, and also a sense of acquiring stability in a new

or changing environment. This is considered to be of particular importance to immigrants who have newly arrived in the UK. There is also evidence to suggest that within many communities, violence in the name of honor is a highly dishonorable act that might lead to social condemnation of the perpetrator, not the victim (Gill, 2006; Morris, 2009).

The concept of honor is therefore extremely complex and is further complicated by the issue of whether it is accurate to consider HBV as a form of gendered violence. In an attempt to see HBV as motivated purely by cultural values or by patriarchal dominance, the reluctance to accept HBV as purely a form of gendered violence is exacerbated by the fact that males can also be victims of HBV. Although honor is essentially used to control female sexuality and behavior, to some extent, men can also come under pressure to conform to prescribed forms of masculinity. For example, men who engage in activities that conflict with the values of their community might be regarded as deviant and their acts deemed to be dishonorable (Terman, 2010; Tripathi & Yadav, 2005). Nevertheless, even when men are placed into potentially abusive situations such as forced marriages, it is still easier for them to escape, whereas women face far more pressure to reconcile themselves to their situations and are more likely to be constrained by additional concerns such as pregnancy, children, lack of education and finances and, for many immigrant women in the UK, the inability to speak English (Siddiqui, 2007).

Historically and globally, the concept of honor has always been linked to ideas of women as the property of their male relatives, which consequently resulted in attempts to control female behavior, particularly female sexual autonomy (Hester, Geetanjali, & Khatidja, 2009; Siddiqui, 2007). Actions that brought shame on honor were redressed through punishment of the deviant female and in some cases the eradication of this purported source of shame—the woman (Feldman, 2010; Goksel, 2006). In these communities, which have been identified as Middle Eastern and South Asian (Brandon & Hafez, 2008; Reddy, 2008), if men did not attempt to repair or renew the male family honor in this way, they were seen as weak and emasculated. This inevitably led to the belief that women were conduits through which male property was to be passed, and were strictly controlled for this purpose (Vandello & Cohen, 2003).

This concept of honor is constructed through dualistic notions of male honor and female shame, whereby masculinity is largely constructed in terms of female chastity (Feldman, 2010; Reddy, 2008). Men who perpetrate HBV retain masculine self-worth not only through the regulation and disciplining of the behavior of their female relatives, but also by protecting them from potential dishonor by other males (Goksel, 2006). Sundari and Gill (2009) also argued that the concept of honor is frequently dominant in communities where domestic violence is perpetrated. Abuse against women within families is justified through the belief that it is permissible to use force in

the guise of protecting honor. Arguably then, HBV can be said to be gender biased, with honor being used as motivation, justification, or mitigation for violence against women as seen from the perspective of the perpetrator. For women in communities that are honor sensitive, honor is the reason why women in abusive relationships are unable to leave due to a fear of bringing shame to their families and the consequent social ostracism that inevitably follows (Wikan & Paterson, 2008). Male perpetrators use the term *honor* to justify or excuse their violence, and women become trapped by its confining nature, which inhibits them from leaving abusive situations and sentencing them to pariah status if they do (Morris, 2009; Siddiqui, 2007). This indicates that so-called family honor is based on a patriarchal ideology of oppression that does not permit women the freedom to make autonomous decisions about their private lives due to the fear that they will bring shame to their families.

THE POLITICIZATION OF HONOR-BASED VIOLENCE

Kvinnoforum (2005) maintains that HBV is a cultural and not a religious phenomenon, with Reddy (2008) arguing that HBV should be interpreted either in the context of cultural tradition or as an aspect of broader, cross-cultural, gender-based violence. Yet, there is no definition of HBV that is appropriate or relevant cross-culturally, because such a definition would need to represent both cultural and outsider perspectives (Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2009). In line with this observation, Almosaed (2004) argued that honor-based crimes are motivated by a desire to preserve family or community honor and that, because they occur within families, many states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan have traditionally used this private context as a pretext for nonintervention. Furthermore, this same pretext has been used by international human rights institutions to exclude crimes of honor from their agendas for action, which has resulted in a situation in which HBV is not situated within the framework of human rights violations but has remained within the sphere of cultural and family frameworks that are outside the scope of legislative reform (Goonesekere, 2000).

This politicization is partly to blame for the persistence of HBV as witnessed today, and is explained in part by the permissiveness of state agencies and institutions (Gill, 2006). Alibhai-Brown (2005) argued that in the UK, the issue of multiculturalism as a concept in which the state advocates respecting the traditions and norms of minority groups consequently contributes to the perpetuation of HBV. The multicultural state has little if any justification for intervening in a minority group's affairs, even if that minority community systematically violates certain members' basic citizenship and human rights (Shachar, 2001). Kukathas (1998) called this noninterventionist approach "the politics of indifference" (p. 691) and maintains that crimes linked to culture or

race are increasingly considered as off-limits to governments, particularly as they do not want to be seen as being racially discriminatory. Indeed, this sensitivity to culture has inevitably contributed to the continuous perpetuation of HBV in the UK (Gill, 2006).

On the contrary, a perspective against multicultural accommodation exists in which it is argued that the state must throw its weight behind the individual in any conflict between the individual and their cultural group, even if this action by the state contributes to the alienation of the individual from their group (Coomaraswamy, 2003). Hester (2004) supported this position, and maintained that the state is responsible for private acts, arguing that for the government to effectively combat the issue of HBV, it must first begin to view the issue as a national problem and not a cultural one. However, the prevailing opinion of practitioners in the field in the UK is that more needs to be done in combating HBV, and that a good starting point would be the government consciously bringing the issue of HBV vis-à-vis multiculturalism into mainstream politics (Brandon & Hafez, 2008; Gill, 2006; Siddiqui, 2007). Yet, although the UK government acknowledges that HBV exists as a significant problem, there is a lack of correspondingly significant policy drive toward tackling it. Indeed, to date, there exists no document published by the UK government that is focused on addressing HBV as a stand-alone issue. In addition, the most comprehensive policy document that addresses HBV, albeit along with domestic violence and forced marriage, still remains the 2008 HACR on domestic violence, forced marriage, and HBV.

APPROACHES OF THE UK GOVERNMENT TOWARD HONOR-BASED VIOLENCE

The approach of the UK government toward HBV is to address it in the context of its domestic violence (DV) policy framework (HACR, 2008). This approach favors integration, which consequently enables HBV to gain from the resources and best practices present under the DV framework (Siddiqui, 2007). Moreover, Sundari (2008) maintained that tackling HBV within this wider framework would advance the service provision within the government's strategies and policies. However, Brandon and Hafez (2008) disagreed with this approach and argued that DV does not reflect the nature and forms of HBV, and the kind of services needed to help victims and survivors. They maintained that HBV is entirely different from DV and must be dealt with separately to make sense of, and be addressed in a targeted way. In support of this, Fowles and Wilson (2008) posited that the dimensions of HBV are not yet as clear or as concrete as DV; therefore, they argued that mainstreaming HBV into DV might consequently lead to poor responses to victims of HBV and might lead to a situation in which victims of honor-based crimes are not taken seriously. Furthermore, available evidence indicates that the

rate at which HBV could deteriorate into honor killings might be underestimated when HBV is cited within the framework of DV, as individuals who are trained to tackle DV cases are ill-equipped to deal with HBV and might not correctly gauge the risk to which a victim is exposed (Brandon & Hafez, 2008).

The problem extends to practitioners in the field who are not unified in their suggestions of what approach is best in tackling HBV. For example, Southall Black Sisters (SBS), a not-for-profit organization that has been at the fore of issues on HBV for over 10 years, supports the approach favored by the government, but believes that it is important to distinguish between HBV and DV in any such framework and that HBV must be given recognition as a different and particular form of violence that affects women from communities with particular cultures, religious beliefs, and norms (Siddiqui, 2007). In addition, Heise, Ellsberg, and Gottmoeller (2002) argued that the incorporation of HBV within the DV framework will reduce and avoid unnecessary duplication of work, diversion of staff, and aid signposting to relevant and specialist service providers. On the contrary, the Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women Group (KMEWO, 2007), in response to the ACPO Strategy on Honor-Based Violence, argued that it is counterproductive to deal with the issue of HBV within the framework of DV. The group maintains that doing so trivializes the seriousness of HBV and might lead to cases being lost within the wider policy framework of DV. They argued that although treating HBV separately might predispose it to racist tendencies, with the state perceiving it as a minority problem, they suggest that the benefit of doing so outweighs the harm (KMEWO, 2007).

Commenting on likely reasons why the UK government favors the approach of tackling HBV within the context of its DV framework, Robinson (2010) suggested that a likely explanation is the government's fear of not wanting to appear "Islamophobic," particularly as the issue of HBV seems to be intertwined with the practice of Islam. Justifying this, Robinson explained that most perpetrators of HBV are of Muslim heritage and justify their action by claiming that their religion permits it. On the contrary, Gill (2006) disagreed, countering that HBV has nothing to do with religion but everything to do with culture. Gill argued that cultures that stress the importance of patriarchal ideals and practices (not religion per se) are to blame for HBV, pointing out that honor-based crimes are also committed by individuals who are not Muslims. Meeto and Mirza (2007) indicated that cultures that exploit patriarchal ideology in the guise of religion as a justification for violence against women are effectively abusing religious values.

From another perspective, Radford and Harne (2008) presented an economic reason for the government choosing to tackle HBV within the context of its DV framework. The cost involved in policing, prosecuting offenders, and rehabilitating victims of HBV is enormous, and, in the context of limited resources, it is economical for the government to deal with the issue of HBV

within the framework of DV, as this framework is already developed with structures in place for its smooth operation. A further justification for containing HBV within an existing DV framework might also be linked to the issue of multicultural sensitivity. To single out HBV as a unique form of violence against women is to draw specific attention to its racial and cultural ramifications, thus putting a political spotlight onto the somewhat sensitive issue of the increasing immigration population within the UK. It is feasible to speculate as to the perceived wisdom of government to allocate additional resources in times of an economic downturn, on such a contentious issue.

THE POLICING OF HONOR-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

The position of the ACPO (2010) is that debates as to what constitutes the context of HBV are not important, and the main focus should be placed on the mechanism to ensure that wherever HBV is situated, police officers in that context are appropriately trained to recognize and deal with the problem. Zia (2008) observed that in terms of policing structures, there are examples of services where responsibility for HBV sits squarely within domestic abuse units and other examples where it sits under community/diversity units. However, what is clear is that HBV has its own particular dynamics and different police organizations will take different views on where responsibility sits within their structures (Zia, 2008). Consequently, the ACPO (2010) strategy on HBV indicates that the critical issue is that, wherever HBV is located, staff members are equipped to recognize and deal with its effects and also to build and maintain the partnership and community links required to be successful in this work. In support of this position, the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) inquiry into the death of Bahnaz Mahmud recommended that the police tackle HBV by adopting a strategy that is focused on partnership working, which reflects the same working ethos that has been developed in conjunction with other social support services, such as child protection and, of course, domestic violence (IPCC, 2008).

However, the police response to the issue of HBV has consistently been inadequate. An example of police indifference is indicated by the case of Bahnaz Mahmud:

Bahnaz had entered a marriage arranged by her Kurdish-Iraqi father when she was just 17. Her husband had repeatedly raped and abused her, even knocking out one of her front teeth after she called him by his first name in public. In late 2005, by which time she was 20, Bahnaz had left this abusive relationship and fallen in love with another Kurdish man from a different tribe. Bahnaz's uncle convened a family council during which it was decided that the family's honor could only be restored by

killing her. Bahnaz was alerted to this plot by her mother and tried desperately to get help, contacting the police on “six different occasions.” Her fears that her family planned to kill her were dismissed by a police-woman who decided she was “dramatic and calculating.” Consequently she was raped, tortured and murdered, and her body stuffed in a suitcase and buried in the back garden of a house. (Smith, 2008, p. 1)

The importance of law enforcement in tackling HBV is vital to either the success or failure of any policy drawn up to combat it (Townsend, Hunt, Kuck, & Baxter, 2006). It is argued that policies that are focused on tackling HBV but do not clearly define the role of law enforcement are doomed to fail (Sharp & Atherton, 2007). Moreover, the very nature of HBV as a prelude in some instances to death justifies the use of the full weight of the law in tackling it (Gill, 2006; Smith, 2008). A positive police response is significant in the sense that the police might be responding to a first disclosure or an attempt at help-seeking, and, thus, supportive responses could save lives (Radford & Harne, 2008).

How the police respond to honor-based crimes conveys an important message, as a sensitive response to victims is likely to reassure them that their complaint is legitimate and will be responded to with respect and professionalism (ACPO, 2010). Making an arrest and treating the perpetrator as a criminal can sometimes come as a serious shock, as for many people acquiring a criminal record has serious consequences in terms of their social standing and employment prospects. Furthermore, a positive police response might facilitate access to social services, whereas a poor response could deter future help-seeking, leaving the victim unprotected and at risk of future violence, and simultaneously reinforcing perpetrators' views that they have a right to use violence when their honor is challenged (Garcia, 2005; Smith, 2008).

In spite of the benefits of law enforcement as a tool for preventing and reducing the perpetuation of HBV, responding to HBV poses a unique challenge to the police. An important issue that affects response is the enforcing officer's perception of his or her role in responding to HBV (Balenovich, Grossi, & Hughes, 2008). For example, to some law enforcement officers, HBV is (in a similar way to some perceptions of DV) a private matter that should be tackled within the confines of the family (Sharp & Atherton, 2007). In addition, the discordance between a police officer's crime control mentality and the social service needs that require an officer to be sensitive to the victim and offender's social welfare mitigates against effective enforcement with regard to HBV (Garcia, 2005). In this context, honor-based crimes are interdisciplinary in that proper intervention by police officers requires each officer to assume a legalistic role that prosecutes the criminal and a social service role that provides the victim with the services necessary to aid in the victim's healing process (Sharp & Atherton, 2007).

Moreover, the UK police force is plagued with several issues that mitigate against effective performance in tackling HBV. The lack of information on the scale of the problem inhibits effective policing, and only by identifying the true scale of HBV would the police be able to allocate resources and deploy officers effectively to combat these crimes (Hasisi, 2008). On the other hand there is, and has always been, a tense relationship between some ethnic minority groups and the police, which is a consequence of, *inter alia*, the political and social marginalization of these groups (Sanghera, 2009). As a result, the police can be afraid to take action for fear of being called racist or “Islamophobic” (Gill, 2006). In fact, the bone of contention is not the fact that honor-based crimes are happening on such a large scale, but the fact that they are so often neglected by the police for fear of upsetting cultural sensibilities that, in effect, leads to cultural incompetency (Sanghera, 2009).

Sharp and Atherton (2007) argued that in the UK, the approach of the police toward HBV has been passive until fairly recently with media attention on these crimes and the publication of the Lawrence Inquiry Report (1999), which recommended that crimes be investigated with the same vigor irrespective of race, culture, and religion of the victim. In line with this recommendation, the ACPO strategy to combat HBV advocated that every member of the police service be educated on all aspects of HBV toward ensuring that no victim or potential victim is lost through the inactions or actions of any staff of the police force (ACPO, 2010). The ACPO (2010) strategy on HBV advocated the awareness in practice of the “one-chance rule,” which suggested that police officers might only have one opportunity to deal with an individual case of HBV, and that how the officer interacts with the victim this one time could be the difference between a saved or lost life. This has been reinforced through guidelines issued to members of the police force to be used when dealing with potential HBV crimes. Police are urged to remember that the investigation of the complaint takes priority and that officers should not be distracted by an oversensitivity to culture above peace-keeping. This is eloquently summed up by O’Brien (1999): “Multi-cultural sensitivity is no excuse for moral blindness” (p. 10).

However, in practice, multicultural sensitivity has led to the construction of HBV by the police as a neutral aspect of immigrant culture. The police response has consistently been political, with Jones and Newburn (2008) maintaining that policing is inescapably political, and has been a focus for sharp ideological conflict between political parties in the UK, with the attitude of the police service alternating between robust and conservative policing depending on the ideology of the party in power. Nonetheless, it is argued that policing should ideally not reflect politics, but when it does, police inaction toward honor-based crimes sends the message that these crimes are not a matter of police or public concern, thereby reinforcing patriarchal assumptions and the idea that HBV is permissible in the context of multiculturalism.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the evidence shows that HBV is a serious and significant problem in the UK that has remained hidden until fairly recently. It is argued that HBV is mainly perpetrated by men against women in the context of using the pretext of religion and culture. The complexity surrounding HBV is reflected through the concerns of practitioners in the field, and by disagreement among practitioners as to how HBV should be addressed. Some practitioners advocate addressing HBV within the context of DV and argue that this would enable integration and therefore enable victims to gain from the resources and best practices present under the DV framework (Sundari, 2008). Yet other practitioners advocate tackling HBV independently (KMEWO, 2007) and argue that DV does not reflect the nature of honor crimes, the forms of HBV, or the kind of services needed to help survivors of HBV. Still others maintain that HBV does not fit the government's definition of DV, as it is entirely different and must be dealt with separately to make sense of it and address it in a targeted way (Brandon & Hafez, 2008). Furthermore, the evidence shows that the police are ill-equipped to tackle HBV, with the UK police service being heavily influenced by political and economic demands (Jones & Newburn, 2008), particularly oriented toward the philosophy of multiculturalism (Sanghera, 2009). Accordingly, this article posits that for HBV to be tackled effectively, it must first be dissociated from culture and regarded as a human rights issue that requires serious policy intervention underpinned by the philosophical principles of valuing life over misplaced cultural competency.

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