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*The Dynamics of
Honor Killings in
Turkey*

PROSPECTS FOR ACTION



Summary and Evaluation

Perceptions of honor that are prevalent in society determine which types of conduct are considered 'dishonorable' and punished. It is upon this foundation that honor related killings gain legitimacy. In order to better understand the conditions which legitimize honor killings and therefore enable their continuation, this study has focused on two principle issues: (1) different perceptions of honor and the factors affecting them; (2) the consequences (including murder) faced by people engaged in 'dishonorable conduct'.

The research was carried out in four cities (Istanbul, Şanlıurfa, Adana and Batman) selected from among those determined to have the highest rates of honor killings according to a 2004 UNFPA survey of honor/'töre' killings reports in three newspapers over a five year period. Respondents were generally reached in city centers. The methodology of research was qualitative and the data on the two issues mentioned above was collected through in-depth interviews and group discussions with a limited number of people in their natural environments. Purposive sampling was used to designate the respondents according to the aim of research. Since we did not utilize statistically based random sampling, we cannot generalize the results of this research. However, generalizability was not the aim of our research. The reason for using a qualitative rather than quantitative methodology lies in the sensitive nature of the issue and the lack of numerous prior investigations. We believe that we could not have obtained adequately rich data from our respondents through the application of rigidly structured questionnaire schedules. Our aim was

to understand the subject better, acquire in depth information about tendencies on this topic, and to achieve some results by putting together our observations and impressions. Our target groups in each city consisted of: native residents and migrants (taking gender and age differences into consideration); different professionals (especially those working more closely with the issue); NGO activists; victims and their relatives. A total of 195 interviews were conducted as part of the research, 18 of which were group interviews mostly involving more than two persons. The total number of the people interviewed was close to 250.

Prevalent perceptions of honor and communal surveillance

Many factors such as gender, age, place of residence, education and tribal and kinship relations affect how honor is perceived and the place it has in people's lives. It was observed that people of rural origin with strong tribal and kinship relations, whose circles of friends and acquaintances have not changed much in case of urban migration and in whose lives family and society is of primary importance tend to put great importance on honor. They see honor as the meaning and the purpose of life, something for whose sake people can be killed.

On the other hand, it is possible to say that, in spite of different perceptions among people, the strongest tendency in all cities is to consider honor as constructed through a woman's body and sexuality and the control of women. Within this con-

text, honor is a man's wife, that is, the 'lawful wife' ('helalin'), sister, or mother as well as other women in the family and even women in his immediate environment. A man is obliged to keep a protective eye on all these women. Such an understanding places women under the surveillance not only of their own fathers, brothers and husbands if they are married, but also of other men in their close circle of acquaintances. As the space of men's responsibility enlarges, the pressure on women also increases. And especially under the conditions of strong tribal and kinship ties or when people live in narrower circles based on face-to-face relations and stronger social control, this pressure becomes even more intense.

When honor is constructed through a woman's body, it entails her daily life activities, education, work, marriage, the importance of virginity, faithfulness, ability to marry the person she chooses, elopement with the person she loves and divorce. In general, women as compared to men and middle aged and older men as compared to young men displayed relatively more tolerant attitudes in their treatment of these issues. However, their views are also influenced by where they come from, whether they are of rural or urban origin, the level of their education and the kind of environment in which they live. For example, it was observed that old, illiterate women of rural origin and uneducated young girls living in a closed environment under intense family pressure were no different from men in terms of intolerance. On the other hand, the strictness of young men regarding honor, even though they may live in cities and have a certain level of education, may be connected to some contradictions they experience. Young men are socialized to control their sisters or their relatives' daughters, but they also have contact with and become friends with young women who have a greater degree of freedom, who go to school, to work and to mixed gender public places. It is clear that men would have a hard time 'controlling' these women who now have roles outside their homes and different opinions about male-female relationships; such women would not likely obey them as is expected in the men's upbringing. Since they do not know how they can draw boundaries to control such women, even young men who are university students show extreme sensitivity to the need for family discipline and training and full compliance with customs, even though they object to 'töre' killings.

A notion of honor based in women's bodies requires a more passive role for women and a more active role for men, which is also connected to national traditions and Islamic principles, which are generalized as the 'fundamental norms of the Turkish and Muslim family.' Numerous respondents in every city emphasized that this is an important element of society's culture. This understanding in a way legitimizes the existence of entirely different roles for women and men within society and, by extension, the application of different standards on the subjects of marriage, divorce and infidelity. Accordingly, 'dishonorable conduct' results in different applications and consequences for women and men and, even worse, the differential perception and justification of honor killings.

In contrast, those who defined honor in a more comprehensive sense, especially as connected to the individual himself/herself, tried to distance themselves as much as possible from the widespread notion that honor is constructed through a woman's body. This approach, which was expressed more among professionals with higher levels of education and a certain social status, native urbanites and NGO activists, emphasizes the importance of individual honesty regarding every aspect of society and the protection of children, society, the country and human values while leading one's individual life as one desires. People who approach honor in this way discuss women and the family more in terms of spouses' mutual faithfulness and devotion to the family and children.

Respondents who strongly objected to the notion that honor is constructed through women's bodies were usually professionals (especially women), young female university students and some women who are active in women's NGOs or are connected to them. Even though this tendency was expressed by fewer people, it is particularly important for this study as it emphasizes the destructive aspect of constructing honor through women's bodies and making men the guardians of women's honor, thereby limiting their freedom.

The research showed that the notion that honor is constructed through women's bodies disseminates through society as part of 'the basic norms of the Turkish and Muslim family' in a more comprehensive sense. This emerged as an understanding that was frequently accepted by our respondents in var-

ying degrees. In this way, even those who express opposition to this understanding are affected by it and may feel obliged to adjust their behavior to society's expectations. This understanding, which puts pressure on men, especially young men, legitimizes the societal surveillance and control of women. In the same way, the penalties which are given to women (and men) who are considered to behave 'dishonorably' are also legitimized.

How are honor killings perceived?

The findings of this research show that people perceive honor killings differently. People also have different views about the differences between honor killings and 'töre' killings as well as the reasons behind these killings.

An important finding is that people tend to differentiate between killings for the sake of honor and 'töre' (custom) killings where family council decisions come into play. In particular, Istanbul respondents talked about custom based killings as quite distant from them and as a problem of 'others'. Such assessments were not only observed among Istanbul natives; migrants expressed similar positions. Those who deemed 'töre' killings a problem of others saw them as particularly connected to the Eastern and Southeastern Regions due to their social structure, underdevelopment and various deprivations. They assessed other honor related murders as inevitable, more individually based actions that could happen anywhere. There were also people who thought of a man's jealous murder of his unfaithful wife as 'something that could happen to anyone'. Therefore, custom and honor related killings are differentiated from each other based on how the murder was committed rather than their reasons and consequences.

On the other hand, people in places where such events were experienced more frequently, especially those who were involved in or closely witnessed such events, did not differentiate between 'töre' and other honor killings. Overall they approached such events with more of an 'insider' perspective. Here, what was emphasized was the understanding of honor underlying these events. They used expressions such as 'it doesn't matter whether it is honor or custom ['töre'] related, they are both the same anyway, they both mean honor' to express that customs play an important role in the determina-

tion of values related with honor in their regions. On the other hand, it was also observed that there was a young, educated group (especially young female university students) living in city centers who stated that custom related killings only took place in rural areas (and were gradually decreasing) and perceived these events as very distant from their own lives even though they lived in places where such events frequently occurred.

Seeing that there are some differences between 'töre' and other honor killings is sociologically important in so far as it allows us to understand each event better and discuss potential solutions. On the other hand, one should be careful when emphasizing difference as it might result in the differential evaluation of 'töre' and other honor killings. This could lead to the belief that the latter has mitigating justifications as compared to the former (especially in terms of criminal laws). The point we should underline is that both types are murders committed with the justification of 'honor' and that we are faced with violent acts that go as far as to take the life of a human being. An approach that does not disregard the sociological differences between them while emphasizing the underlying similarity of basic rationale and consequences may help us perceive both honor and 'töre' killings as violent, criminal acts which belong to society as a whole rather than to 'others' or to certain regions. Taking collective responsibility for these murders will enable the development of preventive measures which cannot be postponed to tomorrow.

The emphasis on inevitability in honor killings

Although we observed different perceptions of honor killings based on the differences respondents perceive between honor and 'töre' killings and on how close they are to such events, the following four approaches were nonetheless observed:

- Those who openly support honor killings state that a person who committed an immoral act would deserve to die and that the people who are forced to kill them would have no other choice.
- Those who conditionally support honor killings state that nobody would wish to commit a murder, however, in case of proven adultery and/or when social pressure is unbearable, people can commit such an act.

- Others say that when people are under social pressure, especially when they are poor, weak and uneducated, it's inevitable for them to commit such a murder as they are unable to live with this dishonor.

- Others state that even if it is based on different justifications, people should not be killed due to so-called 'dishonorable conduct'. While some people in this group said that 'dishonorable conduct' would not be a crime and that punishment of such behavior would be a severe act of violence against women, others stated that the life of a human being cannot be taken either because of their principles or their religious beliefs.

It was observed that the differences in assessments were based on people's understandings of honor. Where honor was stated to be the sole purpose of people's lives and/or constructed through a woman's body, honor killings were more likely to be considered "understandable," "acceptable" acts as well. With the exclusion of those who definitely did not approve of honor related murders (including professionals, women, NGO activists, young female university students and religious officers), respondents who did not openly support such murders still talked about them as inevitable. Among the respondents who shifted blame to society rather than to the murderer by saying that the person was under intense social pressure were different professionals (including some lawyers and policemen) who closely witnessed such events.

The reasons behind honor killings

Even though most of the time people used more than one factor to explain the reasons behind honor killings, it is possible to group their explanations into a few categories:

- Connecting these events to socio-economic deprivations and underdevelopment: Many such people tend to consider honor killings to be a more distant and as a problem that belongs to certain regions (and/or rural areas) and to ethnic groups living in these regions. According to them, these events will be eliminated with the improvement of economic and social conditions.

- Connecting these events to patriarchal relations and seeing them as a consequence of men establishing control over women: In this view, which was especially expressed by some educated and professional women and those working in women's

NGOs, it was also stated that the legal system acts in favor of the powerful.

- Connecting these events to how people raise their children: While some professionals supporting this view stated that children are misdirected under extreme pressure, others (especially urban migrants who experienced different problems) mentioned subjects such as the challenges of training children well, especially in terms of providing them with proper religious training and the fear of God.

- Connecting these events with social pressure which renders people helpless: It was observed that this opinion was emphasized by a wide group of people, including some professionals, in places where such murders were experienced more frequently. According to them, the pressure imposed by the family or tribe on perpetrators of murder is so great that they prefer to go to prison rather than be excluded from their communities. Moreover, imprisonment and their treatment while in prison can enhance their prestige.

- Connecting these events with personal factors: Those supporting this view state that the shock and emotional crisis people experience when confronted with behavior they neither expect nor approve of might lead to such an act. This point was mostly expressed by people who differentiated honor killings as individual actions as opposed to 'töre' killings.

Along with these reasons, many people also mentioned that the media plays a provocative role, especially through the events they show in magazine programs. Another point that was emphasized was organizations' inadequate institutional capacity to support victims or at least provide them with temporary protection. Those indicating this inadequacy were mostly people who worked in public institutions and NGOs that support victims. The point emphasized in these explanations was that inadequate institutional capacity adversely affects the fate of victims.

The emphasis frequently placed on economic and social conditions and social pressure as the reasons for honor killings may in a way lead to insufficient focus on perpetrators' guilt, or at least cause people to approach perpetrators more tolerantly. When men are thought to be neglecting their responsibility to keep an eye on women, the same "surveillance" which controls women also reminds men of their duties by imposing intense pressure on them. However, by over emphasizing the social pressure

behind honor killings we run the risk of strengthening the legitimacy of these murders. Knowing the extent of social pressure especially in situations where people live in large families or with tribal relations, the mechanisms by which this pressure is established, its purposes and the situations in which people can take decisions in spite of social pressure is an important way to identify appropriate counter measures. On the other hand, it should not be interpreted in such a way as to remove the perpetrator's personal responsibility for the crime.

Not all 'dishonorable conduct' results in murder

In the process of evaluating more than 100 stories told by victims, witnesses or those who heard about such events from others, it became clear that while approximately half of the 'dishonorable' events recounted during this research ended in murder, in the other half different solutions were arrived at. However, even if the woman's life is saved, most of these non-fatal solutions still cause her (and sometimes the man) to suffer. As a result, those who are not killed also severely suffer for committing a behavior that society believes to be 'dishonorable'. This suffering includes being excluded from or rejected by the family, being forced to leave the place of residence and sometimes the city, being forced to marry a person who is not loved or inappropriate, being exchanged, having a body part such as the nose cut to present an example for others, etc.

The stories recounted show that the woman's marital status and the type of behavior she was engaged in affected the consequences of such events. However, in each case, the conditions of the environment and the family in question could also change the course of action. Based on this, it was observed that events that seemed quite similar to each other could result in different consequences. The events related in this research were evaluated by dividing them into categories based on the woman's marital status and the nature of the 'dishonorable conduct' in question. These were compared according to the types of bargaining engaged in and the kinds of solutions achieved. People's stories show the following:

- In cases where a married woman has a relationship with another man or is considered to have such a relationship, the woman and the man with

whom she has a relationship deserve to be killed. In such a situation, both the woman's husband and her family, together with the husbands' family, are responsible for the execution of this punishment. In such situations, the existence of some kind of proof of the event is important. In these events, the family of the man with whom the woman has a relationship generally distances itself from the situation and, even if their son is killed, they may prefer to cover up the event. In cases where the woman's husband does not want to commit the murder or her death is avoided by some other means, the entire family may be excluded from society. In such situations, the familial support provided by NGOs or other organizations is very important. Some situations were also described in which the husband's relatives punished the woman through non-lethal violence when there was no significant evidence and the husband opposed her murder.

- In situations where a married woman elopes with another person, it is again thought that she deserves to die. In such situations sometimes the position of the family of the man with whom the woman eloped, and their willingness to support her, can open some doors for bargaining. For example, some bargains entail the marriage of girls from the man's family into the woman's family.

- Situations such as the woman's wish to get a divorce or to leave her husband's home, or a divorced woman having a relationship with another man (which is viewed as if she is a married woman) can end in murder. While the woman may be punished by her husband, her son, her brother-in-law and other relatives who deem themselves responsible for her control may also execute the punishment. In cases of divorce, women are generally under the surveillance of larger groups of relatives or even a circle of people who have no kinship relation with her.

- When a single girl has / is thought to have a relationship with a man, it is possible for this to result in the murder of one or both. However, in some of these events, especially when woman can be married to a man (either her lover or someone else), a non-lethal solution may be possible. In such situations, the girl's family's decision is particularly important. Two key factors that affect the outcome are whether or not the girl is pregnant and the degree of public awareness of the event. It was also related that in some cases when a murder is not

committed, young girls can be pressured into committing suicide by their families. In such cases, if the mother and the sisters strongly object to the killing they may be excluded from the family and/or tribe altogether.

- In cases where a single girl elopes with a man, it was observed that, though the result may be death (for either one or both), different types of bargains are possible. In such events many factors such as whether or not the man with whom the girl eloped is married, his or his family's socio-economic status, whether or not the girl is engaged, if the man's family wants the girl, etc., can interconnect and determine the consequences. Quite complex bargaining, which is often degrading for the woman as she is treated as exchangeable property, is pursued. This is a process about which people's expressions include terms such as 'we took', 'we gave', 'we brought', 'we took away'; the nature of the bargaining is reflected in the use of the language. Within this process, the girls who are given from the family of the man to the family of the girl as 'berdel' in return for the girl who eloped become part of this exchange whether they like it or not. It was observed in several stories that even if the women were not killed as a result of the event, they were forced to commit suicide afterwards, marry against their will, leave their place of residence or were excluded by their families.

- In situations of sexual assault or rape, in contrast, if the girl who is raped is single, forcing her to marry her rapist is most often seen as a solution. If the rapist does not want this or his position is not suitable for it, both the rapist and the girl might be killed. In addition, the relative economic status of the families plays a role here. When the family of a wealthy man does not want a poor girl, the man's family may strike a bargain with that of the girl in order to prevent their son from being prosecuted. On the other hand, when the girl is pregnant, her murder is considered to be important for family honor. In general, it was observed that in cases of sexual assault or rape (especially in urban families or those connected with NGOs), formal institutions were applied to as well whether for support or legal redress. However, whatever the conditions may be, the families usually tend to blame the woman in situations where the woman who was raped is married. It was observed that some women facing death threats in such situations applied to institutions for help.

Evaluations related to the characteristics of the groups laid out above were made taking a minimum of five and a maximum of 29 events into consideration in each category. It was observed in each category that the social characteristics (socio-economic status, ethnic origin, religion and sect, family, kinship and tribal structure, if any) of the families of the individuals involved and their reciprocal power relations together with the extent of public knowledge of the event greatly affect bargaining and consequences.

In the events that were recounted, women (especially mothers of girls) were almost never involved in the decision taking processes of family councils. However, they usually accept the decision in one way or another. Moreover, mothers feel accountable for such events in society because the main role of women is accepted to be the maintenance of the home and the training of children. In the stories that were told, some mothers supported the penalties given to their daughters and in some instances even forced their daughters to commit suicide. On the other hand, there were rare examples of women who neither approved of nor supported the punishments and showed the courage to oppose them. In the process, they risked exclusion from their communities. This can be seen as an indication that under certain circumstances (especially when they are older or have a strong position within the family or the tribe) women can behave differently.

Similarly, some men, although few in number, did not kill their wives or their relatives' daughters despite pressure to do so. These men sometimes suffered themselves, forced to leave their places of residence and excluded by their families (or tribes). In such cases, the existence of institutions that can support the person or the family in need is also important.

What can be done to stop honor killings?

As part of the research, proposals for solutions were solicited from both interviewees and NGOs. Upon general evaluation, the first element that strikes one's attention is that very few people had thought about what could be done to prevent honor/'töre' killings except for some professionals, NGOs, political parties and some people who are connected

to NGOs. What is more important is that in environments where such events are frequently experienced, those very close to the events approach the subject in a quite pessimistic manner and have little to no hope for change. This hopelessness has even affected NGOs activists in Şanlıurfa and Batman. Therefore, eliminating hopelessness about preventing such events in places where they occur more frequently will be important to the success of any action program. People and organizations should make it known that they are sensitive to the issue and consider themselves to own the problem in order to eliminate the atmosphere of hopelessness and helplessness. Public officers, public organizations, local administrators, NGOs and the media may undertake activities, either separately or in collaboration, on the issue. When an honor killing or a person who lives under threat of death in their region starts to disturb everybody who lives and works in that region (from the most authorized public officers to ordinary people) and when nobody wants to carry this shame anymore, then finding solutions will become easier.

Studies on how to prevent honor killings may be gathered under two groups or stages: (1) activities to prevent women (or men) from being victims of honor killings; (2) programs to strengthen and transform people and institutions in the long run.

Among stage one activities, mediation mechanisms that have been used so far might be examined along with the conditions necessary to apply these mechanisms without causing women to be exchanged as property and to suffer. Social and religious leaders who are respected by families and people who work on the issue might be contacted and it might be ensured that NGOs have a say in such processes of bargaining. In order for the effectiveness of both NGOs and public institutions that would provide support to women (and other family members who are in need) to be increased, they should build capacity in this area and have opportunities to protect women under threat, provide them with psychological support and help them to become economically and socially independent individuals. The 'opportunities' of course would come with the establishment of women's shelters in sufficient numbers and capacity, with 24-hour hotlines that could help women in need. These are urgent requirements which have been emphasized by women's organizations for years. Their existence would not eliminate the reasons behind honor kill-

ings but could save the lives of women who live under threat of death. During the research, NGOs as well as some police officers discussed the need for stations where women under threat could take shelter and get psychological support in emergency situations and shelters where they can stay for longer. They said that that they could not give the necessary support to some women under risk who applied to them. The need to spread such institutions at the country level, to obtain state support for sustainability and to improve state-NGO collaboration in this area is evident.

Activities that should be considered for stage two are training programs to achieve transformation of both mentalities and actions, socio-cultural activities that could lay the ground for the elimination of honor killings and programs that could provide support to victims of honor crimes. Within this context, ensuring the participation of both youth and adults (male and female), various professionals (teachers, lawyers, imams, policemen, psychologists, social service specialists, etc.), public officers, local officials, and those working in NGOs is essential. Topics for training should include gender relations, women's rights, early and forced marriage of girls, marriage between relatives, communication within the family, violence and the consequences of violence and especially honor and honor killings. Training programs for every group or profession should be prepared and applied in a way that meets their requirements and/or fits into their daily life.

NGOs should work in neighborhoods and create centers that include activities for all family members in cooperation with public organizations and local governments. In the process, NGOs should take local facilities and requirements into consideration and people speaking the languages of the region should be available. In this way, NGOs can gain public trust and lay the ground for family members to enter into a support network outside their kinship relations. Social and cultural activities and vocational training courses might also be organized in the centers along with awareness training and consultancy activities in various subjects for all members of the family. Organization of various social activities for young men as well, besides those for young women, will not only fill a longstanding gap but also clear the way for them to meet in different environments and learn to become friends.

In the meantime, activities to strengthen women and especially young girls' ability to take their own decisions are of great importance. Campaigns organized by various organizations that support the schooling of girls and their acquisition of a profession should be supported by local governments and NGOs. Strengthening women in terms of their education and economic involvement will in the long run make them visible in society as individuals who can also do something outside their homes and play a role in the transformation of their position in the family and status in society.

Even though many respondents do not think that the recent amendments made to the Penal Code can deter people from committing such crimes, it was observed that a significant number of people (including some professionals) were not aware of these amendments. This situation was not only true for the Penal Code but also for the amendments made to laws related to the protection of women and the family. Therefore, the laws, their amendments and developments with regard to their implementation should be widely publicized not only by NGOs but also by public organizations and the media.

The media, and particularly local media, should: have an informative, critical and transformative role in raising public awareness; provide people with accurate information about both NGOs and other organizations; try to show that violence and murder for the sake of honor violates human rights by involving social leaders, religious officers, respected individuals and popular people from the worlds of science, art and sports; introduce good examples from the struggle against violence, including individual success stories and NGO activities.