

'Honour' by any other name

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A report on domestic violence among South Asian immigrants, released last week at Toronto police headquarters, recommends that the words "honour killing" be shunned in legal and civic discourse. The rationale for the recommendation is that providing a motivation for the crime - "honour" - implies a defence for it. In support of its recommendation, the report points to occasional leniency in the judiciary toward honour-motivated killers from other cultures.

It's true there have been many instances of honour-related judicial leniency. But such miscarriages of justice are more an indictment of the moral relativism the ideology of multiculturalism teaches, to whose blandishments judges are as susceptible as anybody else, than an argument for pretending that "honour killing" isn't a real phenomenon.

I would recommend, on the contrary, that any killing acknowledged to have been executed in response to a perceived need to restore family or community honour not only retain the distinction in public discourse, but in law as well; and that the practical result of the distinction be a wider assignment of criminal responsibility for the killing.

Subsuming honour killings under the umbrella of domestic violence may end up punishing the individual who wields the knife or garrote. But justice will not have been served. Punishment for honour-motivated violence should extend to those within the victim's kinship circle who facilitate it.

For the real horror of honour-motivated violence is that it is not only a cold-blooded, planned execution, often accompanied by gruesome forms of torture, it is characteristically carried out as a family conspiracy.

When 16-year-old Aqsa Parvez was killed by her father and brother, it was the end result of a long and systematic program of mental torture and coercion. One of the great tragedies of that case was that the system did not fail Aqsa. It was simply that the system could not compete with the combined forces of family collusion. Aqsa had made her problems with her oppressive family known to her teachers. Social workers and police intervened. She was removed from the home. And yet somehow her mother sweet-talked her home on a ruse, knowing what was coming (mind you, after the murder, the mother sadly mused that she was under the impression that her husband was "only" going to break Aqsa's arms and legs as a punishment for her failure to respect his wishes that she behave less like a normal western girl and more like 8th-century chattel).

Honour killings are not strictly a Muslim phenomenon, but they are today overwhelmingly so in the West, where 95% of honour killings are perpetrated by Muslim fathers and brothers or their proxies. Of 21 Muslim women who attended the trial of Aqsa's father and brother, when interviewed for their reactions, all - not a single dissent - stated, in one way or another, that Aqsa was the author of her fate for staining her family's honour; several said she "had" to be punished.

This unpleasant fact drives feminists and multiculturalists around the bend. Feminists would like to call all abuse of women "patriarchal" and they hate to admit that relations between the sexes are culturally constructed - by men and women alike. And of course it pains multiculturalists to admit that not all cultures are equally wonderful in every respect.

Our society is not patriarchal. Period. Other cultures are. Period. Burying the evidence for this fact, by pretending that the protection of family honour is not a real and deadly motivating force within certain communities, is not helpful to anybody, and will do nothing to change the mindset of those trapped in honour-addled households.

However, intelligent public discussion of this issue stumbles over a lack of clarity regarding the meaning of the word "honour." More on that in tomorrow's Post.

