

THE HORROR AND FEAR OF HONOUR KILLING

Introduction

Focus

The sensational Shafia murder trial involving the deaths of four females at the hands of their own family members has brought the controversial topic of honour killings into the spotlight. This *News in Review* story explores what honour killings are, gives details of the Shafia murder trial, and looks at how different cultural groups have responded to the issues of gender-based and domestic violence.

On June 30, 2009, a submerged Nissan Sentra with four female victims inside was found at the Kingston Mills lock situated where the Rideau Canal meets Lake Ontario near the city of Kingston. What was initially thought to be a horrible joyriding accident by police was soon viewed as suspicious.

The four victims in the vehicle were identified as the Shafia sisters—Zainab, Sahar, and Geeti, aged 19, 17, and 13 years respectively—as well as their father's first wife, Rona Amir Mohammad, known to the girls as Aunt Rona. By July 2009, police had charged the girls' father, Mohammad Shafia, their mother, Tooba Mohammad Yahya, and their 21-year-old brother, Hamed Mohammad Shafia, with first-degree murder.

According to the Crown, the accused staged an accident to reclaim their family honour, which had been disgraced by their daughters' lifestyle choices. As well, Rona had requested a divorce from Mohammad Shafia,

which would have exposed their illegal polygamous relationship and threatened their status in Canada. All three defendants pleaded not guilty to the murder charges. Three years later, the now internationally known Shafia trial ended with each defendant being convicted of four counts of first-degree murder.

The Shafia case has generated widespread discussion on the controversial topic of so-called honour killings.

Muslim community leaders have publically stated that honour killings are wrong. Others have argued that gender- and family-based violence is not exclusive to any one culture or religion as it crosses all sectors of Canadian society.

The jury's verdict in the Shafia trial has sent a strong message condemning honour killings in Canada. But in reality, the case is far from closed on the broader question of the treatment of women in Canadian society.

To Consider

1. Why did the Shafia trial and its verdict attract so much media and public attention in Canada and around the world?
2. Do you think the verdict in the Shafia case will help deter others who might be considering committing an honour killing of a family member?

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What is honour killing?

Pre-reading Activity

Record any words, ideas, or events that come to mind regarding the term *honour killing*. Write continuously for one to two minutes. Expand your answer using information from the following section.

There is no straightforward definition of *honour killing*. Some people view it as another form of domestic violence, while others believe it is a distinct cultural phenomenon. Unni Wikan, a professor at the University of Oslo, Norway, defines honour killing as “a murder carried out as a commission from the extended family, to restore honor after the family has been dishonored . . . when a female family member has behaved in an immoral way” (*Middle East Quarterly*, Spring 2009). For example, the female—usually a teenaged daughter or young woman—may be perceived to have disgraced the family through her personal appearance, sexual behaviours, and demands for greater independence. She may also have been subjected over time to threats, verbal and physical abuse, and confinement by fathers or older brothers. This pattern of abuse is often ignored by the mother.

Phyllis Chesler further states that honour killings differ from domestic abuse because they are carefully planned in advance and often directly or indirectly involve multiple family members (CBC News online, December 2, 2012). However, the use of the term *honour killing* is criticized for singling out certain immigrant groups, particularly from Middle Eastern and Islamic communities, rather than focusing on the prevalence of domestic and gender-based violence throughout Canadian society.

A Widespread Phenomenon

The practice of honour killings is thought to be tribally based and pre-date the

religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But despite this, some groups have used their religions and cultural traditions to justify honour killings (*The Guardian* online, May 11, 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/may/11/iraq.humanrights1#history-link-box). Most often associated with Muslim cultures, honour killings can also happen among Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs worldwide and tend to occur primarily in Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, and the Middle East (CBC News online, December 2, 2011, www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2011/12/02/f-honour-killings.html).

According to the *European Journal of Public Health*, one in every five homicides in Pakistan is classified as an honour killing despite laws that punish a convicted offender with the death penalty (*The Globe and Mail*, June 17, 2010). Human Rights Watch estimates that over 900 honour killings occur each year, mainly in India’s northern states and the nation’s capital, New Delhi. There is concern that this number will rise as India’s economic shift witnesses more women becoming educated, going out to work, and asserting greater independence against traditional societal and cultural norms that expect them to remain at home, under the control of their fathers or husbands (*Toronto Star*, August 2, 2010).

Courts in Turkey have been criticized for handing down lower sentences to those accused of honour or “customary” killings of approximately 200 female victims annually (*Toronto Star*, June 30, 2010). A 2009 report by the United Nations Division for the Advancement of

Women indicated that approximately 12 honour killings take place in the United Kingdom every year, the majority in South Asian communities. However, in all of these cases, the recorded numbers are likely to be only a fraction of the true number of so-called honour killings since many go unreported.

Honour Killings in Canada

Between 2002 and 2010 it is estimated that 15 women in Canada have been killed in the name of family honour (*Toronto Star*, July 15, 2010). Most recently, Mohammed Shafia, his wife Tooba, and son Hamed were convicted of the 2009 murders of three teenaged daughters and Mohammad's first wife in order to "cleanse the family name and restore the family honour" (CBC News online December 2, 2011). Other murders include:

- In 2000, Jaswinder "Jassi" Kaur Sidhu was kidnapped and murdered in India. Her husband, whom she married against her family's wishes, was severely beaten. Her mother and uncle are alleged to have organized and hired the killers. They have been arrested in British Columbia and await an extradition hearing as of early 2012.
- Amandeep Atwal, 17 years of age, was killed by her father in 2003. He was

convicted of her murder. Apparently he "disapproved of her relationship with her boyfriend, who was from a different ethnic group" (CBC News online December 2, 2011).

- Khatera Sadiqi and her fiancé were shot to death in 2006 by her brother, who was later found guilty. He told the court that their father did not approve of the fiancé and he killed his sister to restore the Afghan family's honour (*The Globe and Mail*, June 22, 2010).
- Sixteen-year-old Aqsa Parvez was strangled to death in 2007 by her father for rejecting Muslim traditions. Her father and brother were sentenced to life imprisonment (*The Globe and Mail*, June 16, 2010).
- Amandeep Dillon was stabbed to death in 2009 by her father-in-law, who thought she was having an extra-marital affair. He was convicted of second-degree murder (*Toronto Star*, June 11, 2010).

While immigration results in a more culturally diverse society, concerns of culture clash increase when traditional family norms come into conflict with Western values. As these tragic stories continue to make news headlines, the question for Canadians is how to address this controversial topic of honour killings.

Follow-up

1. Examine your list of words and ideas from the Pre-reading Activity and select the top three that you think best describe the term *honour killing*. Why do you think the term *honour killing* lacks a clear and concise definition? What makes this term so controversial?
2. Would you agree or disagree that honour killings should be identified as a distinct type of domestic violence? Explain.
3. Do you think concerns around increased family conflicts driven by a culture clash are valid or just heightened in the wake of the Shafia murder case?
4. Do you think it is unfair to single out Muslims in Canada as group within which most honour killings occur?