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Naming “honour killings” necessary to prevent further violence against women

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CALGARY, AB, Sept. 14, 2010/ – The death of 16-year-old Aqsa Parvez in 2007 was neither the first nor last honour killing in Canada. But details of her murder are better known than most. The statement of facts agreed to by the Crown and defense in the prosecution of Aqsa’s killers make it clear her father and brother strangled her because they thought she had brought shame to the family. To re-establish family “honour,” Aqsa had to die.

With increased numbers of new Canadians coming from honour-and-shame cultures -predominantly found in South Asia, the Middle East and North Africa – the phenomenon of “honour killing” must be directly addressed.

Some people claim there is nothing special about honour crimes and say they are just instances of the much broader plague of domestic violence. Their worry is that if we give this kind of violence a special name, we risk smearing whole ethnic communities with a women-hating stereotype they don’t deserve.

This is a mistake. There are distinctive features of an honour killing: a background obsession with female purity/chastity, pre-planning, family approval or complicity, and often broader community approval for forcing an errant woman to “toe the line” according to culturally-sanctioned norms.

We have to single out cultural practices which violate women’s right to equality, without condemning entire cultural groups.

Rooted in a complex matrix of cultural values

“Honour killings” are rooted in a complex matrix of cultural values premised on women’s inferiority. In some cultures, the birth of a baby boy is celebrated, while a baby girl is hardly acknowledged. Some cultures practice infanticide of baby girls, or selective gender-based abortion of female fetuses. Girls in these cultures are raised to fulfill one purpose – to be married as a virgin to a husband of their family’s choosing, and then to bear children. Any departure from purely chaste behaviour or complete acquiescence

to the patriarchal family structure can be construed as dishonourable. At bottom is an obsession with female purity and compliance with male authority.

Preventing this oppression of women and girls requires that we fully understand what we are dealing with. How are social workers, police, school officials and other front-line service providers to address a phenomenon if they can't talk openly about it?

Canada is obliged to address "honour killings"

Globally it is estimated there are at least 5,000 "honour killings" annually. The number is probably much higher: these crimes are often misreported as suicides, or accidents, or simply ignored. A number of UN initiatives address violence against women. The International Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) – which Canada has ratified – requires regular reporting on measures taken to eliminate violence and discrimination towards women. CEDAW recognizes "honour killings" as a distinct form of violence against women, and identifies the countries and cultures where these killings most often occur.

The new citizenship Guide

In 2009, the federal government released a new Citizenship Guide for all new Canadian citizens. "Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship" states: "In Canada, men and women are equal under the law. Canada's openness and generosity do not extend to barbaric cultural practices that tolerate spousal abuse, 'honour killings,' female genital mutilation, or other gender-based violence. Those guilty of these crimes are severely punished under Canada's criminal laws."

This is the first time the Canadian citizenship guide has spelled out that the practice of "honour killing" is not allowed in Canada and is punishable under the Canadian Criminal Code. "Honour killing" is murder and will be prosecuted and punished as such.

Reluctance to focus on cultural practices

The reticence to acknowledge that Aqsa Parvez's death was an "honour killing" is widespread among Muslim Canadians who fear increased Islamophobia. Imam Ala al Sayed, a Muslim leader in Toronto, was quick to say that the problem in the Parvez home was not Aqsa's refusal to wear the hijab. It was simply ordinary teen rebellion that many Canadian families face.

But the issue of "honour killing" is not about Islam, or any other religion, as it has been known to occur in Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Christian, and Jewish contexts and in communities which are not especially religious but nevertheless trapped in traditional honour-and-shame ways of thinking.

"Honour killing" is about a set of patriarchal cultural values that must be named, condemned and confronted.

There is no denying it: not all cultures embrace gender equality. It is not racist to name those practices which deny women's dignity in the name of "honour." Entire cultures are not being condemned, just the aspects of them incompatible with women's humanity.

Richelle Wiseman will be speaking at Gender, Culture and Religion: Tackling some difficult questions hosted by the Sheldon Chumir Foundation, Calgary, October 1 and 2, 2010.

*Channels: The **Calgary Herald**, Sept. 11, **Hamilton Spectator**, the **Truro Daily News**, the **New Glasgow Evening News**, the **Amherst Daily News**, Sept. 15, the **Montreal Gazette**, Sept. 16, 2010*

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