

KEYNOTE LECTURE: HONOR VIOLENCE 101: AYAAN HIRSI ALI

Ayaan Hirsi Ali: Thank you to the AHA Foundation, and thank you to the service providers, judges, professors and to my friends. We are thankful for the John Jay College for partnering with us at the AHA Foundation for this event.

Today, I want to take the opportunity to answer 3 questions that pertain to honor violence and discuss 6 cases of spousal honor killings in Queens. Thank you to the DA's office for giving these cases to us to discuss.

First, I want to address the unique circumstances facing women and girls in an honor-based culture.

Secondly, what are the challenges facing law professional when they are confronted with these cases?

Third, are there crucial differences between honor violence and honor killings elsewhere and that in the West? Is there a crucial difference between honor violence in the West and domestic violence in the West as well?

First, at the AHA Foundation we put emphasis on Muslim women. In honor violence's unique circumstances I don't want to imply that this violence is limited to Muslim households or Islamic culture. There are other cultures that engage in honor violence and killings as well. Honor violence includes coercion, beatings and sometimes murder. In these cultures, these individuals are killed due to interpretations of religious scripture. There are also examples of honor violence in the Hindu and Sikh cultures in India and Latin America.

Why the emphasis on Muslim women? Our expertise lies in this group and their unique circumstances. The violence towards these women needs special attention. Muslim women, more than other groups, suffer violence in their communities. Our resources are limited as well, and because of this we must choose a focus. In radical Islam there are justifications for this behavior and at the moment we don't see that in other cultures. There is no doubt that all women's violence should be emphasized and addressed.

Back to the question, what are the unique circumstances facing these Muslim women?

First, I want to show you the code of honor and shame in families, communities and even civilizations. Acts of honor are rewarded and those acts perceived as shameful are severely punished. These are unique to women in certain cultures. It has to do with their sexuality - virginity, chastity, fidelity and purity are emblems of honor. Sex before marriage is considered infidelity. These are sources of shame for the family or tribe. The women in these cultures don't own their bodies. Their sexuality is a commodity and it's of high value which is owned by their families. These sexual commodities are seen to lose value once they are believed to be tainted.

It's normal for a father to select a husband of his choice for his daughter at any time. Refusal to comply with his choice is an act that strips the father of his honor. If a woman refuses him, she is filthy or seen as damaged goods. Fathers will kill their daughters over this. This is a way of hiding the shame brought onto the family via the insubordinate daughter. A father creates his daughter and she carries the shame. She has the consequences.

Committing adultery is the worst offense. Some husbands will punish this disobedience. We see forms of violence and even murder against females for less such as a female wearing makeup, or driving a car. Having a boyfriend that's not a Muslim is also considered an offense.

There is a third aspect that's special towards Muslim women, and that is a great fear of reporting the violence or even just talking about it with friends or teachers. There are a few fears I have heard from these women. One is a fear of losing family. Two, is shaming your family. Then there's fear of the physical punishment, like beating or murder. Then there's an enduring punishment in hell.

With this background, we come to the second part. What are the challenges facing law enforcement when confronting these cases? There are many challenges and each case is unique. First, with the challenges in the U.S. and New York City, the police and other service providers in the West are unfamiliar with the cultures and the women in these cultures. An example is the story of Banaz Mahmod in 2006 in the U.K. She had sought help by going to the police. Her father and uncle wanted her death to look like a suicide. They forced poison down her throat. The first person she spoke to within the police department didn't believe her. That person said she was a drunk. Just three weeks later she was dead.

The second challenge to professionals is the factions within these cultures. Pressure groups from the community insist that there is no violence in these cultures. Any attribution to these cultures they claim is racism or anti-Islam. They condemn the perpetrators, yet then they will provide them with legal aid.

Another issue is that these victims feel guilty when they are rescued. For example, they tell their family members where they are after rescue and they seek out their family, or they give their families information on the shelters where they are protected.

The fourth challenge, that is only relevant in cases of honor violence, is the conflicts in the system. For example, in my experience in the Netherlands there was a policy where Turkish victims were attended by church professionals. We had a case where a woman was in a shelter but after the shelter personnel disclosed her location, she was found by her husband and shot dead. This crisis reveals a conflict within the professionals of the religious groups and their work. The lesson that it brought up is that in many experiences, unless you are 100% certain of the professionals of the culture, or the village or of the victim, please do not involve professionals from the culture/religion/background of the victim. You need to have the victim's best interests in mind. The victims may succumb to the loyalties in their community. These are matters of life and death.

The third question for today is, what are the differences between honor violence and killings and Western domestic violence? Domestic violence can happen across all cultures and social classes, groups and age groups even. Men are more likely to commit any violence. Often their victims are women and children. But it's a myth to think that women don't engage in domestic violence too. It may be true that women will engage in domestic violence more than men. The violence and extreme nature of it is very serious. That's the common picture.

But people who commit domestic violence in the West know they are doing something wrong. Domestic violence is recognized as a crime in most Western countries.

The governments of the West have shelters and programs for the victims of domestic violence, but not necessarily for the victims of honor violence. And the implications of these two kinds of violence are different.

The typical abuser in a case of domestic violence knows that when he hits his wife or child, he's doing something wrong. The wife knows she should not be taking the abuse. Clearly there's an element of shame. The shame is that you're too weak to seek help. Often the violent behavior is blamed on substance abuse. Service providers say that where abuse is common, oftentimes substance abuse accompanies it. Domestic violence, even though it occurs a lot in the West, is morally unacceptable and socially wrong.

Things are different in cultures governed in shame however. In these cultures, people commit domestic violence and use physical punishment. In most of the shame cultures, people in the system don't necessarily know that this abuse is wrong.

Unlike the West, there's no medal for helping. There are shelters set up by Westerners and they are often over crowded. In some countries, like Germany and Turkey, the process to obtain help can take up to 6 months. The abuser and all his victims share the belief that the punishment is justified. The shame is the interaction of the victim and perpetrator. Often there is no history of substance abuse, he may have no criminal record. Most people in shame countries grow up in violent homes, where abuse is common. So while education is helpful, it doesn't prevent it. Domestic violence is a punishment for the family and is considered to be morally, legally and socially right.

I come across Americans almost every day. The subject of honor violence comes up and most Americans think it does not happen in America. I'll show you six cases now. These all happened in Queens. The first case is of Sherif Elkady. In June 1996, -- he told the police that they were fighting because she was out late. He said that the fight got worse when he accused her of being an inappropriate Muslim woman. He found a love note in her purse. And then he stabbed her repeatedly. He was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison.

Then there is the case of Abraham Amin, a 26 year old Egyptian. In 1998 he stabbed his fiance 15 times because she was disobedient. He pleaded first degree manslaughter and was sentenced to up to 25 years in prison. He argued he was mentally unstable.

The third case happened in 2007. A man stabbed his wife 251 times, killing her. The police were called to the home. The man pleaded guilty to

manslaughter. Manslaughter!

The fourth case is of a 45 year old Pakistani. He strangled his girlfriend with an extension cord. She had previously criticized him for being unemployed.

The fifth case is about an Indian national of 40 years old. On December 15, 1998 he strangled his wife. The case of her murder dragged on for 9 years. Finally, in October 2007 he pleaded to manslaughter and was sentenced to 15 years.

Our final case is of a 36 year old. In 1999, Samiya Haquqi was burned and dismembered by her husband. The brother supposedly helped and was also convicted of manslaughter. On the day of her disappearance she was accused of having a boyfriend. The husband told a friend, "in Afghanistan, due to her behavior she would be considered a whore and killed." Her husband was convicted and sentenced to 26 years in prison.

If you Google "honor violence" you will find the definition as follows:

Many family members may kill female family members. The reasons are refusal of arranged marriage, seeking a divorce, or the perception that the woman has behaved in a way that's inappropriate.

Before the honor killings, however there is a history of beatings and lacerations to the woman.

What is happening in these honor killings? We at the AHA Foundation want to raise awareness especially in the professional fields to see how these stages of honor violence progress and to keep these women safe and intervene at the right time.

I have come to the end of my presentation. I am happy to take questions if the technology allows us. Thank you very much.

[APPLAUSE.]

Executive Director: Hello? I'm sorry if you couldn't hear the speech. These cases were Queens homicides. We'll send these cases to you. Any questions?

Female Speaker: Thank you so much for that talk. Can you hear me?

Ayaan Hirsi Ali: Yes.

Female Speaker: My question is that all these examples in Queens seem to come from large immigrant communities. These people involved live with the people from their original cultures. I wonder if these things happen in other parts of the U.S. where there's not these networks in place already. Does that make sense?

Ayaan Hirsi Ali: Yes. The answer is that we don't know yet. There's a lack of evidence but the evidence I just gave from the DA's office or the media, that's what we have. Depending on the family if you come from a background where you attach a lot of importance of the sexuality of the families in that case you will continue to carry on that tradition. So, logically I think these places with concentrations of ethnic groups these happen but I wouldn't rule out just two families living close to one another committing these acts as well as committing acts against their own families.

Executive Director: Any questions?

Female Speaker: The question is what will you do to reach out to these immigrant communities?

Ayaan Hirsi Ali: There's a website - www.theAHAfoundation.org. These communities and the potential victims reach to us. When I give speeches across the country to different communities, some girls will push notes into my hands while I sign books. We are seeing that the more the AHA Foundation is out there, then the more change we can do. And this is in America and other places outside America.

Male Speaker: In your studies do you see cultural assimilation of women. For example there's cases in Omaha where you have conditions of statutory rape. I spoke with a Somali cab driver. He said, "well they say I can't beat my wife so I don't." He's listening to the culture of the U.S. and tying it back to domestic violence. Do you see that in your work? And the studies you have done so far?

Executive Director: What is the question?

Male Speaker: Is there much cultural assimilation concerning this problem in

the U.S.? I heard this statement from a Somali cab driver that he can't beat his wife anymore in the U.S. This idea of cultural assimilation becomes internalized. Or does it?

Ayaan Hirsi Ali: With cultural assimilation in the U.S. I see three types. One is the type of assimilation like people from cultures of honor and shame taking the Western culture, or American culture, and relinquishing and saying I don't care about my sister's or my daughter's lifestyle.

There's a basic understanding of the American legal system by the family of the perpetrator. The culture of honor and shame exists at home and then there are the lenient forms of punishment. In the Netherlands the youngest son molests the daughter because there is mild punishment. The punishment is 2-3 years in a prison of youth. Then we also see modern young women taking on a Western lifestyle and enjoying their lifestyles and that is what gets them in trouble with their families.

Executive Director: Other questions?

We will take a short coffee break. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE.]