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## Nadi a Shahram: 'Honor killings' exposed

### *Young Muslim women in West are increasingly vulnerable*

By Nadi a Shahram  
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Since the brutal slaying of 37-year-old Aasiya Hassan and the murder charges filed against her husband, Muzzammil Hassan, in February, there has been at least one murder labeled as an "honor killing." In Arizona, an Iraqi immigrant was accused of running over his daughter with his car.

These two cases have triggered a lot of writing and discussion about honor killings and domestic violence. Here in Erie County, a number of seminars have been offered in various communities in the hope of raising awareness of the widespread violence against women. Many of these community discussions have focused on the issue of whether Hassan's killing in Orchard Park was in fact committed by the husband—who has pleaded not guilty—as a kind of Islamic honor killing. Some Muslims were offended by that labeling of her murder, and summarily oppose the use of any term but domestic violence to describe the act.

As a major part of my teaching at the University at Buffalo Law School, where I offer a course titled "The Effects of Culture and Religion on Family Laws," I have been researching honor killings and domestic violence for the last several years. Hassan's murder trial is scheduled for next year. Until we hear the evidence, none of us can really know if this killing was meant in some way as an honor killing or whether it was just another terrible act of domestic violence.

But although we don't know the facts yet, we do know that this would not be the first time a Muslim woman has been killed in this country in the name of "honor" at the hands of her husband or her father. There have been numerous cases of such murders being committed in the United States, murders that clearly fit into the typical pattern of honor killings.

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An honor killing refers to the death of a female by a male family member, usually in concert with other members

of an extended family, for infringing on the honor of the family. Such dishonor is claimed to be caused by a woman's actions — refusing to wear a hijab, assimilating into Western culture or rejecting arranged marriages, just to name a few. Sometimes even when the female has been victimized by others, for example by being molested or raped, she is still seen as somehow shaming and bringing dishonor to the family.

Simply put, any behavior that may have the perception of inappropriateness calling into question the “purity” of the female is suspect. However, it is the intent of the killer that is the main determinative factor in separating honor killings from domestic violence, and not whether it happens in the United States or overseas.

A woman asking for a divorce, even where there is domestic violence, has been cited by some Muslim men as an undesirable behavior supposedly justifying honor killings, not only in Muslim countries and in Europe, where nearly 25 million Muslims live, but right here. In my research I have concentrated on cases in the United States. Killings labeled by the press as honor killings, over the objections of the Muslim community, show the murders to be primarily but not exclusively a Muslim-on-Muslim crime.

In 2008, when Kandeela Sanwal from Atlanta, Ga., filed for divorce from an arranged marriage to a cousin twice her age, her father, a 52-year-old immigrant from Pakistan, strangled her. According to police, he could not accept the “disgrace” a divorce would bring on his family.

Here in New York, Fauzia Mohammed of Henrietta was stabbed multiple times by her brother in 2008 for planning to go to school in New York City. He pleaded guilty to attempted second-degree murder. In 2004, Hatice Peltek of Scottsville and her daughters were stabbed and bludgeoned to death with a hammer by Hatice's husband because her brother-in-law had molested her.

In 2008, sisters Sarah and Amina Said of Dallas, Texas, were found shot to death in a cab. Their father, Yaser, was accused of killing them. Police documents report that Yaser's wife fled their home with the daughters a week before the murders because she feared her husband might harm the girls. Yaser had previously tried to marry off Amina in his native Egypt when she was 16.

In 2004, Dr. Lubaina B. Ahmed of Ohio was murdered, along with her father, sister and child, by her husband because she asked for a divorce. Ahmed was a physician and had suffered domestic violence at the hands of her husband over several years before he killed her.

While statistics are hard to come by due to the private nature of such crimes and the fact that very few are reported, the U. N. Population Fund reports that a low estimate of 5,000 women are murdered in honor killings each year worldwide, and it is clear that young Muslim women in the West are becoming increasingly vulnerable. The cultural clash for families immigrating into the United States is highlighted when, as in the Arizona case, a woman is murdered because of her Western lifestyle. Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus view honor and morality as a collective family matter. Rights are collective, not individual. Family, clan and tribal rights supplant individual human rights.

The justification offered for honor killings all along has been the unfounded claim that Islam as a religion sanctions these heinous crimes. But a close examination of the Quran and interpretations of this religious text shows that honor killings are not religiously sanctioned acts, but rather are manifestations of an extremely patriarchal and perhaps misogynist culture.

Although no verse in the Quran mentions or encourages such acts of violence against girls and women, there are some verses that have been widely interpreted by backward-thinking Muslims as making women the possessions or property of men. Even though there is no justification for honor killings in the Quran, the perpetrators of these killings and their supporters always justify the killings by a deeply rooted cultural belief that it is men's religious right to punish “their” women (as their property) for perceived transgressions.

The holy Quran, when read and interpreted correctly, never justifies the killing of a female family member. Starting in mid-sixth century Arabia, verses such as 2:223,4:3 and 4:34, given to limit abuse of women and to protect them, are indeed being used to subjugate in the 21st century. Therefore, reinterpretation of these verses is a

vital part in eliminating these brutal practices.

It is up to us as Muslims to change this negative image, not by getting offended by the labeling of honor killings, but by eradicating the roots of such cultural beliefs perpetuated by the patriarchal interpretation of verses in the Quran that men are "in charge of women."

Every semester my students have a hard time keeping a straight face when I speak of Islam as a proto-feminist movement and prophet Mohammad as a visionary champion of women's rights. These are historical facts, but non-Muslims generally do not see this because of the badly distorted view of Muslims and the Muslim religion as portrayed in today's world.

Given the current state of women's rights in many Muslim countries, Muslims themselves are to be blamed for the distorted image that the media love to portray. Laws in many Muslim countries remain lenient toward men who kill under the honor defense. These laws date from Napoleonic times, entwined with barbaric pre-Islamic practices in a patriarchal culture. It is only backward-thinking patriarchal Muslims who continue to glorify such brutal acts against women as somehow being condoned by Islam.

Indeed, domestic violence is a significant problem in the United States, and not just in the Muslim community. Between 1989 and 2004, 21,124 women died at the hands of an intimate; 8,997 men died in domestic violence during the same time period. Because the U. S. Department of Justice does not catalog the victim's or murderer's age, religion, ethnic background or immigration status, it is not possible to know what proportion of these killings are honor-related.

While honor killings are just a minority of total domestic violence in the United States, they constitute a distinct phenomenon. A 2008 Massachusetts-based study found that "although immigrants make up an estimated 14 percent of the state's population, they accounted for 26 percent of the 180 domestic violence deaths from 1997-2006." Lenore Walker, author of "The Battered Woman Syndrome," agreed that fundamentalist immigrants control and patrol their women very closely. "Given the strict rules, there are a lot of things to kill them for," she said.

Walker confirmed the difference between the victim-perpetrator in honor killings and ordinary domestic violence. In ordinary domestic violence involving Westerners, it is rare for brothers to kill sisters or for male cousins to kill female cousins. And while child abuse occurs in which fathers may kill infants and children, it is very rare for Western fathers to kill teenage daughters.

Also, other discrepancies exist. Walker observed that Western men are more apt to kill little boys than girls in their family. "Women with postpartum depression kill their babies, and men may kill babies by shaken baby syndrome," she explained. She did not "know of any batterers who are helped to commit the murders by their brothers or cousins or other family members." Occasionally, the man's relatives may be in the house when the murder occurs, but that is quite rare in domestic violence.

The victims of honor killings generally are teenage daughters or young women. Wives are victims, but to a lesser extent. And, unlike most Western domestic violence, honor killings are carefully planned. The perpetrator's family may warn the victim repeatedly over a period of years that she will be killed if she dishonors her family by refusing to veil, rebuffing an arranged marriage or becoming too Westernized. Most importantly, only honor killings involve multiple family members. Fathers, brothers, male cousins, uncles and even grandfathers commit the murder, but mothers and sisters may lobby for the killing. Some mothers collaborate in the murder in a hands-on way and may assist in the getaway.

Although there are several differences between domestic violence and honor killings, perhaps the most important difference is that Muslims who commit or assist in the commission of honor killings view these killings as heroic and even view the murder as the fulfillment of a religious obligation.

Phyllis Chesler, emeritus professor of psychology and women's studies at Richmond College of the City University of New York, has done extensive research of 50 honor killings in North America, Europe and Canada.

"Seldom is domestic violence celebrated, even by its perpetrators. Here, wife batterers are ostracized," she said.

In my opinion, it is vital that Muslims themselves, especially religious leaders and heads of mosques, take a strong, firm stance against honor killings — and not only in public when giving interviews, but when they learn of such abuse. Of course, one of the problems is that some religious leaders indeed are also wearing political hats.

A couple of years ago, I pleaded with a political/ religious leader to indirectly intervene in two domestic violence cases and somehow communicate with the two physician husbands on their un-Islamic treatment of their wives. "Nadia, I have to please you at this end of the spectrum and those on the other end of the spectrum," he said politely. In both cases there was physical and emotional abuse of the wife by her then-husband.

Further, religious leaders must have some standard of accreditation by the community at large, at least here in the United States, because it is these religious figures who guide those who follow misinterpretations of the Islamic way of life. There is no honor in these killings, so let us take the honor out and call it what it is: murder.

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