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Gender Roots: Conceptualizing "Honor" Killing and Interpretations of Women's Gender in Muslim Society

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Abstract

The phenomenon of "honor" killing is one that has formed out of deeply rooted concepts of sexuality and gender roles in Muslim societies. These conceptions have been implemented into everyday life and social infrastructure and have created, in some places, a generally accepted power dynamic that subjugates women and generates conceptualizations about women's sexuality and their assumed obedience. In recent decades the gender constructions of, predominantly, the Middle East and of other Muslim populations have captured the attention of Western thinkers, especially with regards to feminist thought. The Western gaze has produced a number of responses, some of which have reinforced and even strengthened imbalanced gender hierarchies as a means of rejecting Western engagement. The idea of "honor" means something different within the context of Muslim cultures and is not one necessarily accessible to outsiders. The practice of "honor" killing found in some Muslim communities is built on a foundation of gender ideologies that have predominated since pre-modern Muslim society and it is driven by the need to hold onto traditional values.

Keywords

gender, Islam, women, Middle East

Disciplines

Anthropology | Gender and Sexuality | Islamic Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Religion | Social and Cultural Anthropology | Sociology of Religion | Women's Studies

Comments

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Gender Roots:

Conceptualizing "Honor" Killing and Interpretations of Women's Gender in Muslim Society

by Brittany Barry

In 1979 the United Nations adopted an international bill outlining rights for women called the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Despite the implementation of CEDAW by most nations with large Islamic populations, de facto discrimination against women still occurs. The phenomenon of "honor" killing is one that has formed out of deeply rooted concepts of sexuality and gender roles in Muslim societies. These conceptions have been implemented into everyday life and social infrastructure and have created, in some places, a generally accepted power dynamic that subjugates women and generates conceptualizations about women's sexuality and their assumed obedience. In recent decades the gender constructions of, predominantly, the Middle East and of other Muslim populations has captured the attention of Western thinkers, especially with regards to feminist thought. The Western gaze has produced a number of responses, some of which have reinforced and even strengthened imbalanced gender hierarchies as a means of rejecting Western engagement. The idea of "honor" means something different within the context of Muslim cultures and is not one necessarily accessible to outsiders. The practice of "honor" killing found in some Muslim communities is built on a

foundation of gender ideologies that have predominated since premodern Muslim society and it is driven by the need to hold onto traditional values.¹

At the very root of the issues women face in Islamic societies are the stigmas surrounding sexuality that are woven throughout their histories and permeate the everyday lives of Muslims. These stigmas and ideologies have created certain expectations of the sexes that have remained relevant to the present day. In the Islamic tradition societies are built on a foundation rooted in interpretations of the Qur'an and/or the hadith, the former being the word of Allah and the latter referring to traditions set by the Prophet Muhammad. The interpretations and reinterpretations of these documents have been at the heart of every Muslim society and the rule book by which they function. According to Mir-Hosseini, a great deal of the gender-related strife in Muslim countries today is the result of discord between the "modern and pre-modern" or "contemporary and classical" notions of justice (Mir-Hosseini 2013, 3). In the Egyptian Muslim family laws, codified in 1920, there is the concept of *qiwama*, which is a man's "obligation to protect, provide, and guard their family" (Al-Sharmani 2013, 38). It has a number of implications in legal practices, such as courtroom practices, which will be discussed later. The strength and validity of *qiwama* comes from a Qur'anic verse:

Men are the protectors (*qawwamun*) and the maintainers of women because God has given the one more strength (*faddala*) than the other and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous (*qanitat*) women are devoutly obedient and guard in the husband's absence what God would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them first. Next, refuse to share their beds. And last beat them lightly; but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means of annoyance (4:34, Yusuf Ali's translation).

¹ The quotational usage of "honor" is meant to emphasize the relativistic nature of the term with respect to the act of honor killing. My goal throughout the work is to explore how social norms regarding sexuality identity feed into and conceive the notion of "honor" which leads to honor killing.

This verse implies that it is the job of men to protect and maintain, implying their power and responsibility over women, who in return are devout and obedient to their male counterparts (Al-Sharmani 2013, 39). To understand the more structural implications of gender, it is important to consider the physical limitations drawn from rhetoric surrounding sexuality.

The prevailing social norms in Muslim communities acknowledge and interpret the presence and function of sexual desires and instincts; however, formal laws determine when those desires and instincts are appropriate. The actions and practices pertaining to sexual identity generally accepted by a group of people differ from society to society pending their interpretations of text, past practices, and gender dynamics and functions. Imam Ghazali (1050-1111) in his book, *The Revivification of Religious Sciences*, claims, “If the desire of the flesh dominates the individual and is not controlled by the fear of God, it leads men to commit destructive acts” (cited in Mernissi 1975, 2). It is here implied that, while God has provided desire and sexuality, it is to be monitored and regulated. The way these desires, like other forms of temptation, are to be treated is as a test of faith. It is then implied by this idea that the role of women’s modesty is to protect men from temptation to ensure men maintain a positive relationship with Allah. American anthropologist George Murdock has classified two ways in which societies regulate sexual instinct: through internalized sexual prohibitions and through external precautionary safeguards; he claims Western practices belong to the first category and veiling to fall under the second (cited in Mernissi 1975). Murdock implies the sophistication of Western civilization in its lack of a

need for a physical reminder of prohibition, in contrast to Muslim civilizations where the veil is needed to remind them to refuse sexual desire. Mernissi responds to this with an argument over whether women's sexuality is active or passive. She believes that the act of physically hiding or veiling women implies female sexuality as an active concept (Mernissi 1975, 3).

In conceptualizing women and their sexuality it is apparent there is an assumed underlying power behind that sexuality. It can then be presumed women's sexual draw is so powerful that men are easily influenced by it, and, as a means of preventing men from acting on their desires inappropriately, veiling is used to stifle temptation. The term for men succumbing to their desires can be referred to as *fitna*, the chaos provoked by sexual misconduct. It is then important to wonder why female sexual appeal is such a threat to Muslim society. The idea of women and their sexual attraction being such a powerful and subversive force provides an interesting perspective on the oppression of women. If women have so much power and influence, it is ironic this power and influence does not manifest in other ways that work to augment and reinforce their role and status in society. Furthermore, the consideration of an inherent weakness in the will of men brings up a number of questions regarding the pervading male dominance in many Muslim societies.

The idea that men can be overcome and "tricked" by women's intrigue is not an unfamiliar one. In the story of Sheherazade, the storyteller in *One Thousand and One Nights*, she is able to keep Shahryar, the king, enamored and captivated with her stories. Shahryar had a practice of marrying a new virgin each day and then having them killed the

next day after consummating the marriage so they could never be unfaithful to him. Sheherazade, after deciding to spend a night with the king, tells a new story every night ending in a cliffhanger; the king has no choice but to wait until the next day to hear how the story ends. For one thousand and one nights she keeps Shahryar hanging on her every word until he eventually falls in love with Sheherazade and makes her his queen. The story of Sheherazade is representative of the cunning of women and their ability of to arouse men's interest in them through their own craftiness. The conclusions drawn by Mernissi, however, claim that women and their sexuality are reduced to sexual objects with the means of disrupting prosperity and that they are merely a means to test but also reward Muslim men (Mernissi 1975, 14). A double standard can be found when analyzing women's sexuality. When regarding women, female sexuality is dangerous and potentially corruptive; it is a force that needs to be monitored and controlled. By contrast, when regarding men and their desire, female sexuality, when it is overcome, is seen as a means of demonstrating piety. These claims become apparent when observing taboos regarding sex and sexual behaviors.

Within Islamic societies there is a strict line drawn between licit and illicit sexual acts and behaviors. According to Kecia Ali's interpretation of Qur'anic passages, "lawful sex – that is, approved acts between partners who are legally permitted to one another – is good, healthy, and praiseworthy as a divinely approved form of pleasure. Unlawful sex – where the partners are forbidden to one another or, to a lesser extent, the specific acts engaged in are disapproved – is reprehensible, the cause of social chaos and personal sin, and deserving of earthly punishment as well as divinely wrought chastisement in the

hereafter” (Ali 2013, 60). As discussed earlier, sex and sexuality that goes beyond the strict, publicly accepted concepts of legal and licit sex are thought to bring chaos and corruption to Muslim society. A popular narrative used to validate these social expectations pertains to Muhammad’s temptations. In this account, the Prophet explains that, if a man sees a woman he is infatuated with who is not his wife, he should go find his wife and have intercourse with her (Ali 2006, 60). The reasoning follows that, since illicit satisfaction of unlawful desire would warrant punishment, lawful satisfaction of desire should therefore warrant reward.

It is important to note that, under laws of polygamy that prevail in most Muslim-majority societies, a Muslim man can have more than one licit partner at a time while a woman can only have one. Additionally, the practice of repudiation, which is also allowed by legal codes in some Muslim countries, permits men to verbally terminate their marriage without justification. Interestingly, Muslims believe that one of the dimensions of society where the progress represented by Islam is evident is with regards to human sexuality. It is believed that, prior to civilized Muslim society, sexuality was promiscuous, lax and uncontrolled. “But what is peculiar about Muslim sexuality as a civilized sexuality,” states Mernissi, “is this fundamental discrepancy: if promiscuity and laxity are signs of a barbarism, then the only sexuality civilized by Islam is the woman’s sexuality; the man’s sexuality is promiscuous (by virtue of polygamy) and lax (by virtue of repudiation)” (Mernissi 1975, 15). There are structural elements within Muslim society that imply a greater trust in a man’s sexuality and desire by providing greater freedom in seeking lawful

satisfaction. All of the engrained gender expectations discussed thus far manifest themselves in Islamic laws and societal practices.

The conceptualizations of sexuality and gender mentioned play an important role, both explicitly and implicitly, in marriage contracts. First, and perhaps most simply, marriage renders sex between a man and a woman licit. Additionally, however, there are certain obligations, both legal and moral, implied by marriage. A predominating balance, according to Mir-Hosseini, is that between women's right to maintenance and their obedience to their husbands. A woman's right to maintenance refers to the responsibility of the husband to provide things such as food, clothes, and shelter; however, women lose their claim to this right if they are acting disobediently (Mir-Hosseini 2013, 10). Additionally, women still face difficulties in terminating their marriage in many Muslim societies; a woman must acquire either the consent of her husband or the permission of a Muslim judge after making a sound claim. In Egyptian family law, for example, the grounds on which women can file for "fault-based judicial divorce" are non-maintenance, absence, defect, harm, the husband's polygamy, and imprisonment (Al-Sharmani 2013, 38). The inequalities existing between men and women's marriage rights and obligations are, according to Mir-Hosseini, attributed to by men's authority, or *qiwama*, and the fact they have greater responsibilities and thus are assumed to deserve greater and more frequent rewards. This authority also grants them more autonomy and say in the marriage and its status.

Qiwama was essentially the cornerstone of the legitimacy of *fiqh*, or jurisprudence, in Egypt prior to official legal reforms and the adoption and implementation of CEDAW in 1979

(Mir-Hosseini 2013, 12). While the marriage laws in Egypt have since changed, the question of what sex is licit or illicit is still a topic of debate. The problem, however, is the refusal to outwardly discuss these topics. In general, when the question of sexuality goes undiscussed, expectations become unclear. What results, in some cases, is an environment where definitions of “licit sex” become discretionary and left up to one’s own interpretation. In these instances it becomes possible for a crime, such as an “honor” killing, to be justified by the person committing it. Again, it is ironic that when “violations” of these expectations are acted upon, it is at the hand of men, usually a father, brother, or husband. The intended victim in the cases of “honor” killings, however, is most often a woman, even though it is men who seem to be unable to control their sexual desire. The actual intended purpose of “honor” killings, then, would appear to be the punishment of women who tempt men into committing a sexual act not considered licit, implying they should have known better than to bring chaos and shame to their families. The aforementioned convention, CEDAW, was developed in order to combat such acts of discrimination based on sexuality and gender, but it has been met with some ideological controversy for its “Western” ideals.

Studies of the Middle East have a certain exotic draw for Westerners, especially those looking into gender. Western feminists have a sort of infatuation with Muslim women and are intrigued by the notion of women’s rights in the Middle East and have made attempts to bring Western feminist thought to the region. These attempts, however, have had mixed effects on ideologies on sexuality and gender. The imposition of Western gaze and cultural comparison has raised some defensive stances by Muslim societies. According to Ali, “On matters of sexual morality in general, Muslim authors from a variety of perspectives present the Muslim model as

better for women than degrading Western norms which, in allowing unrestricted sexual liberty, fail to protect women from male exploitation” (Ali 2006, xv). There is disagreement, however, between these justifications and the reality of the gender and family structure in Muslim societies. These views also do not line up with premodern texts about how the main duty of the wife was her sexual availability (Ali 2006, xv). It is also notable that, in this generalization of Muslim authors, their claim for the Muslim model being better for women is based on their belief that it protects women from male exploitation. Based on foundational gender dispositions and expectations outlined thus far, it makes more sense to conclude that the Muslim model works to protect Muslim society from men’s uncontrollable desire for women in comparison to the West, where women are free to express their sexuality. If it is true that acts such as “honor” killings are used as a means to suppress women’s sexuality it is necessary to further analyze how “honor” is used to justify this oppression.

Historically, particularly in the West, honor is a term associated with masculinity and power. The restrictions placed on women for men’s benefit in Muslim societies, both pre- and post-modern, are evidence of the threat women and their sexuality pose to men’s honor and men’s ability to resist sexual temptation. Honor is heavily reliant on the conservation of women’s chastity and modesty, which are accomplished through shame for their potentially dangerous effects on men and the prosperity and general well-being of society. Wikan (2008) makes an important claim about the legitimacy of honor and how it is heavily subjective to the views of others and whether or not one’s honor is generally accepted and respected by others. She goes on to explain how, in many cultures and languages, “honor” and “face” are either the same or can represent similar ideas. Based on this analysis one can conclude that honor is

something one wears at all times and is open to the scrutiny of the public eye. As Wikan explains, honor is even more significant in Muslim societies, as something that one both holds dear and of protects. It is, she says, “a part of yourself, like your nose” (2008, 53-60). Following this logic, honor is something clearly visible to the public eye and so its presence or absence is apparent. Because honor is associated with men and seen as their responsibility to own and protect on behalf of the family, women are simply an embodiment of men’s honor and only serve as a potential threat to that honor and a possible trigger for chaos and dishonor.

Fadime was a victim of an “honor” killing in Sweden in 2002. She had sensed the possibility of an “honor” killing for her choosing of her own spouse and for speaking out against the “honor” practiced in some communities of Sweden. Prior to her death, she said, “To the outside world, I am their face. Whatever I do, I must consider the men in my family” (Wikan 2008, 60). The social aspect of honor is crucial to understanding how one can come to be *dishonored* because it is based on the reaction of others. It is this fact wherein lies the significance of a society’s negotiated gender and sexuality norms. Gender, as a socially constructed concept, is dependent on the social context in which it exists. If the social context regards women’s gender and sexuality as something that needs to be monitored and controlled, then the failure to do so could be interpreted as a failure to uphold honor. In other words, if a father is unable to manage his own daughter’s expression of sexuality, it could be deemed dishonorable and considered enough incentive to commit an “honor” killing in an attempt to reclaim that honor. It is evident that “honor” killings are not simply an act of misogyny or a result of a patriarchal social structure. It is also important to note that “honor” killings are not specifically a Muslim practice, but rather, through the gender constructions that

have shaped Islam, the religion has become a means to justify it. Fadime's case, along with others who have fallen victim to "honor" killings, indicates the need to discredit the use of murder as a means to save face and the use of "honor" as a means to justify murder. The conceptualizations and motives used to justify the act are based on the formulated and engrained concepts of gender from premodern Muslim society that have since carried through to the present. What has become apparent is that the ways in which gender has been interpreted may not necessarily fit logically with the prescribed gender dynamic. The ironies and discontinuities that have been pointed out in the ideologies regarding gender and sexual desire may indicate the need to reevaluate the relevance of gender and sexuality in the power balance between men and women in Muslim societies. While the gender and sexuality of women in the Middle East and in other Islam-practicing areas is a topic that draws the attention for many, especially in the West, it may be time to begin questioning the significance we, too, place on women's gender and sexuality.

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