

Between Traditional Practice and Secular Law: Examining Honor Killings in Modern Turkey

The popular image of Turkey as a secular, Westernized country gracefully bridging the divide between the traditional religious Middle East and modern Europe does not capture the full spectrum of Turkish society. Although Turkey may appear to have fully entered the modern Western world, the continued prevalence of honor killings and the patriarchal social structure that supports the practice testifies to the deeply rooted traditional practices that remain a visible component of many communities. Despite Ataturk's modernizing social, governmental, and religious reforms in the 1920s and 1930s, honor killings continued in traditional rural communities with few consequences for the murderers until within the last decade. Since the 1990s as Turkey has attempted to integrate itself more fully with the European community honor killings have attracted increasing attention from human rights activists and academic scholars. Researchers have focused on the cultural, traditional, and religious basis of honor killings, however many scholars disagree over whether religion is a factor and the extent of its influence on the traditional practice. While some researchers report that it is a purely traditional and cultural practice with no connection to religion, others maintain that popular interpretations of Islam are an important component in the continuation of honor killings. Regardless of the connection between religion and honor killings, the strongly patriarchal social structure of Turkish society supports the practice and has contributed to its continued prevalence in modern Turkey. Although the Turkish government has enacted legal reforms aimed at eradicating the practice, these new laws have been ineffective and there is evidence that honor killings are

actually increasing partially due to immigration. As immigrants from rural areas have moved to major cities in Western Turkey they have brought their traditional practices and honor-based value system, spreading honor killings from rural regions to modern urban areas. In addition, new laws enforcing harsh sentences for honor-related crimes have led to the increase of “honor suicides” as an alternative method of upholding traditional values and practices. The tension between secular government laws banning honor crimes and the continued prevalence of honor killings in traditional communities testifies to the resilience of tribal patriarchal social structures and value systems. Due to the deeply rooted and complexly intertwined cultural, patriarchal, and religious basis of honor killings in Turkey, the traditional practice remains extremely difficult to eradicate and continues in modern Turkish society despite the government’s recent legal efforts aimed at its elimination.

The practice of honor killings is deeply rooted in pre-Islamic tribal customs, and has remained part of traditional culture in many rural Turkish communities. During the 1920s and 30s Turkey experienced a period of radical social, religious, and legal modernization under Ataturk’s leadership that included tremendous advances in women’s rights, outlawing polygamy and granting men and women equal rights.¹ Despite these reforms guaranteeing women equality and legal rights, many women in rural communities continued to live within a strictly patriarchal society unwilling to embrace new egalitarian attitudes, thus they remained subject to the traditional value system. One of the principle beliefs within this value system is the idea that the honor of a family or tribe is embodied in their women, thus women’s conduct that is considered

¹ Aysan Sev’er and Gokceceik Yurdakul, “Culture of Honor, Culture of Change: A Feminist Analysis of Honor Killings in Rural Turkey,” in *Beyond Borders: Thinking Critically about Global Issues*, ed. Paula Rothenberg (New York, NY: Worth Publishers, 2006), 290.

sexually immoral or inappropriate threatens familial honor.² In a traditional society where honor means everything, losing one's family honor can result in ostracism and extreme social condemnation, thus men are conditioned from a young age to cherish their honor and protect it through control over female relatives. According to traditional beliefs, honor is intimately connected with female sexuality and the only way to restore familial honor once it is damaged by a woman's sexual misconduct is by killing the guilty woman.³ Although Turkish law grants women legal equality, in reality perpetrators of crimes against women receive severely reduced sentences if judges determine the crime to be honor-related.⁴ The equation of familial honor with the sexual propriety of women in traditional culture creates a society in which honor killings are viewed as an acceptable and appropriate response for women's actions viewed as sexually immoral. Over the last two decades as honor killings have attracted increasing attention from international human rights organizations, numerous researchers have studied the causes of honor killings in Turkey.

Academic research conducted on the social and cultural basis for honor killings reflect the varying societal reactions to the practice and the variety of opinions regarding the position of honor killings in Turkish society. While some academic literature reports that honor killings stem solely from cultural and traditional beliefs and practices and are unrelated to religious beliefs, other sources maintain that although the practice may have traditional roots it also includes a religious component. Scholars advocating both of these perspectives cite interviews with Turkish citizens, religious leaders, and convicted honor murderers, thus conveying the multitude of societal beliefs concerning honor killings in modern Turkish society. This variety of opinions

² Filiz Kardam, "The Dynamics of Honor Killings in Turkey: Prospectus for Action," *United Nations Development Programme: Population Association* (2005), 17.

³ Canan Arin, "Femicide in the Name of Honor in Turkey," *Violence Against Women* 7, no. 7 (2001), 821.

⁴ Sev'er and Yurdakul, "Culture of Honor, Culture of Change," 293.

regarding honor killings testifies to the deep traditional roots of the practice and the fact that it remains a socially and religiously acceptable method of preserving familial honor in some communities while simultaneously being condemned as a barbaric tribal custom and strictly forbidden by Islamic texts in other communities. A close examination of academic literature focused on honor killings in Turkey provides further insight into the social and religious causes and justifications of the continuation of this traditional tribal practice in modern Turkey.

Academic literature frequently cites the cultural and traditional roots of honor killings as the primary basis of the continued practice in Turkey while dismissing any connection between honor-related crimes and religion. Aysan Sev'er and Gökçeçişek Yurduku report in their research that family members of victims of honor killings “and the actual killers invoke a cultural understanding of honor rather than a religious one” when justifying honor killings and conclude that “any connection between Islam and this heinous crime is by no means clear or direct.”⁵ Similarly, Leyla Pervizat states that religious leaders unequivocally “denounce the practice” of honor killings and quotes a conservative Muslim tribal leader saying, “This is honor, what has that got to do with the Qur’an?” however this imam continued with the statement that “men’s honor comes before the [Qur’an].”⁶ Pervizat concludes that “invoking the Qur’an is not a useful way to denounce” honor killings and instead effort should be focused on changing the “concepts of masculinity, culture, and tradition” which condone and support the practice.⁷ Although these scholars are certainly correct in emphasizing the cultural and traditional influences in the continued prevalence of honor killings, it is also important to consider the

⁵ Sev'er and Yurduku, “Culture of Honor, Culture of Change,” 300.

⁶ Pervizat, Leyla, et al., *Violence in the Name of Honour: Theoretical and Political Challenges*, edited by Shahrzad Mojab and Nahla Abdo-Zubi (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2004), 138.

⁷ Pervizat, et al., *Violence in the Name of Honour*, 139.

religious connection with the practice as Islam remains intimately intertwined with Turkish cultural beliefs and values.

The Qur'an contains no references to honor killings and orthodox Muslim leaders and scholars clearly state that Islam strictly forbids the practice, however many Muslims interpret Islam in a manner which condones the killing of women in order to restore male honor. In academic literature researchers cite religion as evidence forbidding honor killings as well as justifying their continued prevalence. In "Dynamics of Honor Killings in Turkey" the author Filiz Kardam quotes imams and individuals who believe that according to Islam "no one has the right to take a life given by God" and thus the Qur'an expressly forbids the practice of honor killings.⁸ However in their article "Customary Killings in Turkey and Turkish Modernization" Hlal Onur Ince, Aysun Yarali and Dogancan Oysel recognize that although the Qur'an may forbid honor killings, the traditional patriarchal social structure interprets Islamic teachings in a manner which condones the practice by reaffirming the "value of existing structures" and reconfirming people's "attachment to local traditions."⁹ Although the majority of Islamic authorities condemn honor killings as forbidden in the Qur'an and against Islam, some Muslim leaders view honor killings as "part of Islam's code" and have even issued rulings declaring the practice "part of Islamic dogma rather than a detestable remnant of tribal" customs.¹⁰ The traditional value of honor is deeply rooted in Turkish culture as is the common Middle Eastern cultural belief associating "honor with women's bodies" and granting men the right to control their female relatives.¹¹ These contradictory interpretations of Islam are rooted in different cultural value systems and the intertwining of traditional practices and religious teachings. While

⁸ Kardam, "The Dynamics of Honor Killings in Turkey," 44.

⁹ Hlal Onur Ince, et al., "Customary Killings in Turkey and Turkish Modernization," *Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 4 (2009): 544-545.

¹⁰ Yotam Feldner, "Honor Murders – Why the Perps Get off Easy," *Middle East Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (2000), 42.

¹¹ Sev'er and Yurdakul, "Culture of Honor, Culture of Change," 294-295.

some imams draw their view forbidding honor killings directly from Islamic texts like the Qur'an and *hadith*, other religious authorities and Muslim individuals gather their religious beliefs from wider sources and include cultural practices and religious commentaries as well as textual doctrine in their interpretation of Islam.

Islamic doctrine and religious texts such as the Qur'an and *hadith* are frequently interpreted in a variety of ways allowing Muslims to reach contradictory conclusions due to historical interpretations and religious commentaries. Although honor killings "predate Islam and are not consistent with the Qur'an" itself, most Muslims do not draw their beliefs solely from the Qur'an and rather acquire their religious practices from *hadith* and numerous commentaries.¹² Many of these *hadith* and commentaries were collected and edited during the period of the Arab conquest, which involved the rapid Islamization of a variety of different populations whose "cultures, customs, and institutions" were integrated into Islamic cultural and religious practices.¹³ Some of these customs, such as a strongly patriarchal social structure and honor-based value system, became so interwoven with Islamic religious traditions that they are frequently viewed as central elements of Islam despite the fact that they were not established in the Qur'an.¹⁴ The connection between honor, religious interpretations, and patriarchal societies is important to consider when trying to understand the continued practice of honor killings.

Since Islamic doctrines are open to a variety of interpretations, over the centuries male religious scholars and political leaders have emphasized patriarchal tones within Islamic texts in order to reconfirm a culturally-based patriarchal social structure and transform it into a religiously-condoned system, thus "entrenching their own authority and privileges" through

¹² Sev'er and Yurdakul, "Culture of Honor, Culture of Change," 289.

¹³ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, (New Haven: Yale University, 1992), 81.

¹⁴ Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 86.

religious interpretation.¹⁵ Drawing from these commentaries and some *hadith*, many Muslims believe men are favored over women in Islam and explicitly equate “God with husbands” to the extent that they believe “ingratitude to a husband is like ingratitude to God.”¹⁶ From this premise, it is clear why many Muslims attach religious significance to male honor and consider women who disobey their husbands or fathers to have committed a religious as well as social crime. Honor killings are thus considered religiously sanctioned in traditional communities because a woman who had damaged her family’s honor is also guilty of dishonoring God. The complex intertwining of cultural values, traditional social structures, and religious interpretations that support honor killings in Turkey are directly confronted by increasingly strict legal measures directed against honor-crimes, thus highlighting the tension within Turkish society between secular law and traditional practice.

Since the 1990s human rights groups and women’s advocacy organizations have devoted increasing amounts of time and money to publicizing the continued practice of honor killings in Turkey and pressuring the Turkish government to take stronger legal steps towards its eradication. Although Turkey has passed stricter laws enacting harsher punishments for men found guilty of honor-related crimes, these laws are frequently ineffective due to the deeply rooted patriarchal social structure and division between state laws and traditional practices. The law may state that a man guilty of an honor killing must receive a life sentence, however in reality such sentences are usually dramatically reduced.¹⁷ Until 2002 honor murderers received reduced sentences “on the legal basis of ‘grievous unjust provocation’” or in other words, according to Turkey’s Penal Code a woman who was killed for dishonoring her family was

¹⁵ Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 67.

¹⁶ Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam* 108.

¹⁷ Sev’er and Yurdakul, “Culture of Honor, Culture of Change,” 293.

considered to have “provoked her murderers unjustly.”¹⁸ Although this phrase was removed in 2002, many cases since then have resulted in reduced sentences because judges have found that the men were “exceptionally provoked” and thus lesser sentences were considered appropriate.¹⁹ The new Turkish criminal code, enacted in 2004, places honor killings in “the most severely punished category of qualitative murders,” a step that many human rights activists view as an important move towards abolishing honor killings in Turkey.²⁰ However, the effectiveness of such laws is debatable. While some activists and human rights professionals believe that these laws will “deter people from committing [honor] crimes if executed properly,” many individuals believe that harsher sentences for honor killings are ineffective.²¹ In his book *Bliss: A Novel*, the well-respected Turkish author O. Z. Livaneli reflects many Turks’ opinion that “the problem of honor crimes cannot be solved by legal measures alone” and what is needed to truly eliminate the practice is a “change in consciousness, which can only be achieved through education and economic development.”²² Although the Turkish government has taken legal steps aimed at eliminating honor killings, these steps have not been clearly effective and there is even some evidence that honor-related crimes may be spreading and increasing, partially due to larger immigration populations in urban areas.

Over the last twenty years Turkey has experienced a dramatic rise in the number of rural immigrants from Eastern Turkey settling in major cities in Western Turkey including Istanbul and Izmir. Many of these immigrants have retained their traditional customs and practices, including their patriarchal social structure and honor-based value system. Consequently, honor

¹⁸ Pervizat, et al., *Violence in the Name of Honour*, 41.

¹⁹ Ince, et al., “Customary Killings in Turkey,” 545.

²⁰ Ince, et al., “Customary Killings in Turkey,” 545.

²¹ Kardam, “The Dynamics of Honor Killings in Turkey,” 51

²² “*Bliss: A Novel*” by O. Z. Livaneli. <http://media.us.macmillan.com/rggguides/9780312360542RGG.pdf> (accessed November 20, 2010).

killings are no longer events that only occur among rural populations of “Kurdish and Arabic minorities” and instead primarily “take place in big metropolises” with large immigrant populations.²³ Over the last five years Istanbul has had the highest number of reported honor killings, “followed by Ankara, Izmir, and Bursa,” all of which are “modernized,” industrial cities.²⁴ Honor killings are frequently not reported and thus it is difficult to record precisely how many occur per year and where, however human rights activists and scholars agree that honor killings and honor-related crimes have “increased exponentially since the 1990s” both within Turkey and worldwide.²⁵ Research indicates that migration and “migration-related problems like identity crises and lack of cultural ties are the foremost causes of the increase in [honor] killings and violence against women” in Western Turkey.²⁶ In addition to the increase in honor killings related to migration, the introduction of harsher sentences for honor crimes has resulted in the practice of “honor suicides.”

The term “honor suicide” refers to the practice of families forcing their daughters to commit suicide in order to cleanse their honor, thereby restoring the family honor without risking the possibility of sending a male relative to jail. The practice of “honor suicides” enables families to live within the traditional honor-based value system and continue the patriarchal social structure which supports killing girls and women in order to restore familial honor without openly disobeying the secular legal code.²⁷ Since the revision in Turkey’s penal code has imposed life sentences for perpetrators of honor killings, families have taken alternative paths of maintaining the traditional practice including “forcing their daughters to commit suicide” or

²³ Ince, et al., “Customary Killings in Turkey,” 539.

²⁴ Ince, et al., “Customary Killings in Turkey,” 539.

²⁵ Phyllis Chesler, “Worldwide Trends in Honor Killings,” *Middle East Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (2010), 3.

²⁶ Ince, et al., “Customary Killings in Turkey,” 545.

²⁷ Dan Bilefsky, “How to Avoid Honor Killing in Turkey? Honor Suicide,” *The New York Times*, July 16, 2006, final edition,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/16/world/europe/16turkey.html?ex=1156392000&en=9b278770b48ab704&ei=5070> (accessed November 15, 2010).

killing them “and disguising the deaths as suicides.”²⁸ Although Turkey’s secular laws have changed and now explicitly impose harsh sentences on convicted honor murderers, the social consciousness and honor-based value system in many communities has not shifted, thus honor killings and “honor suicides” remain an accepted part of traditional practice in direct opposition to secular laws.

Turkey’s bid to join the European Union prompted increased demands to enact laws against honor killings, however solely legal actions are not sufficient to eliminate the practice. The penal code reforms of 2002 and 2004 were directly associated with pressure from the E.U. and human rights NGOs and gave activists hope that stricter legal sentences would result in an immediate decrease in honor killings.²⁹ Although the E.U. warned Turkey that “failure to progress [in eliminating honor killings] could impede” its bid to enter the union, the Turkish government’s legal reforms have been ineffective in decreasing the number of honor-related crimes.³⁰ Studies conducted on the effectiveness of new laws enacting harsher sentences for honor crimes conclude that legal reforms have had little affect on the continuation of the traditional practice and the Turkish government must focus on education and economic development in order to achieve real change. Many women living in traditional communities both in Eastern Turkey and large cities are “not aware of their existing rights” and there are no “services they can... use in order to be informed about” their legal rights and options.³¹ New laws and human rights activists’ work has drawn increased attention to honor killings in Turkey,

²⁸ Bilefsky, “How to Avoid Honor Killing in Turkey? Honor Suicide.”

²⁹ Mehru Jaffer, “Turkey takes the honour out of killing,” *New Internationalist* Aug. 2005: 6 (Academic OneFile. Web. 6 Oct. 2010), 6.

³⁰ Bilefsky, “How to Avoid Honor Killing in Turkey? Honor Suicide.”

³¹ Pinar Ilkcaracan, “Exploring the Context of Women’s Sexuality in Eastern Turkey,” *Reproductive Health Matters* 12 (1998), 73.

however the Turkish government's legal reforms have been ineffective in decreasing the practice indicating that a different approach is necessary in order to enact significant change.

Turkey is frequently viewed as a bridge between the traditional Middle East and modern Europe, yet the continued prevalence of honor killings in Turkish society testifies to the deep roots of traditional practices and customs in the modern secular state. While some researchers studying the causes of honor killings in Turkey argue that the practice is unrelated to religion others believe honor crimes are condoned by patriarchal interpretations of Islam. Despite this disagreement, researchers agree that the traditional honor-based value system in modern Turkey continues to support the practice of killing women in order to restore family honor. Although the Turkish government has enacted legal reforms aimed at eradicating the practice, the deeply patriarchal social system has rendered the new laws ineffective. Judges frequently do not enforce the harsher sentences for honor-related crimes and policemen do not investigate suspicious disappearances of women or strange "accidents" that result in young women's deaths. Despite increased efforts at eliminating honor killings, there is evidence that the practice is spreading as rural immigrants move to major cities in Western Turkey bringing their traditional customs and honor-based value system with them. The strict sentences for honor crimes mandated by the new legal reforms have also lead to a sharp increase in "honor suicides" as families force their daughters to commit suicide rather than risk male relatives being sent to jail. Although the Turkish government has made an effort to decrease honor killings through new laws punishing honor crimes, merely implementing secular legal reforms is clearly insufficient. Without increased educational outreach and the development of legal support systems for women, the practice of honor killings and honor-related crimes will continue. In order to enact significant change and eliminate the practice of honor killings the Turkish government must develop

policies and laws that challenge the established patriarchal social structure and encourage an overall shift in social consciousness towards a more egalitarian society.

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