

The Price of Honor

Jordanians are fighting a brutal Arab tradition—the murder of women for alleged sexual impropriety

By Lisa Beyer

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Sirhan, a 35 year old murderer, is cheerful and relaxed and happy to tell his story. He's especially proud to describe the efficiency with which he shot his younger sister Suzanne in the head four times last March. "She came to the house at 8:15," he relates, "and by 8:20 she was dead." Three days before, the 16-year-old girl had reported to police that she had been raped. "She committed a mistake, even if it was against her will," says Sirhan. "Anyway, it's better to have one person die, than to have the whole family die from shame."

And his is not a logic rare in the Arab world. For centuries, many of the region have engaged in "honor killing," the intra-family slaughter of allegedly errant females. Women have endured for custom, while legal establishments have tolerated, or even condoned it. But now activist in Jordan, back by the royal family, are dragging the issue out of darkness. "We are determined to be in example in our part of the world," Queen Noor told CNN's Christiane Amanpour last week.

Honor killing has its roots in the crude Arabic expression, "A man's honor lies between the legs of a woman." For Arab women, virginity before marriage and fidelity afterward are considered musts. Men are expected to control their female relatives. If a woman strays, is widely thought, the dignity of the men can be restored only by killing her. In Jordan the 25 or so cases of honor killing documented every year constitute a quarter of all homicides.

The slightest sniff of scandal can be a death warrant. The director of Jordan's, National Institute of Forensic Medicine, Dr. Mu'men Haddadi, says that in 80% of the cases in which he conducts a hymenal exam, which is routine in Jordan when a girl has gone missing, the same girl will be returned to him soon after as a corpse,

even if she proved to be a virgin. “Once the story is out in the community,” says Asma Kader, a lawyer and feminist, “they have to kill.” Forbidden sex isn’t always the issue. Marrying or divorcing against the families wishes can also provoke murder.

As it is common in the Arab world, the law in Jordan winks at honor killers. If a man catches his wife, or a close female relative, in the act of adultery and kills her, he is exempt from punishment. If the situation only suggests illicit sex, he’s entitled to a reduced sentence. In such cases, jail terms range from a few months to a few years. Sirhan served six months.

For women under threat, there is little recourse. Running away is next to impossible since Arab societies are close-knit and few women have the means to live alone. Jordanian authorities have a bizarre remedy: they jail endangered women. “Rafa,” 20, was locked up in in prison after her uncles and brothers vowed to murder her for having a three-day affair with a co-worker. At any one time, Jordan’s prisons may house 70 such women. Sometimes they are released after their families promise not to harm them, though that is no guarantee. Suzanne’s male relatives signed such a pledge before Sirhan killed her.

Once an unspoken topic, honor killings have begun to be spotlighted in the media, thanks in part to Rana Husseini, a trailblazing reporter for the English-language Jordan Times. Since 1996, the Jordanian Women’s Union has operated a hot line for women in distress. Creating a safehouse to protect them is the next objective of activists. Abolishing the legal loopholes is another.

Even with such changes, honor killings are hard to combat. Sirhan says that at the time he killed his sister, he thought he was committing a capital crime, yet he wasn’t deterred. “I’m proud,” he beams. Sirhan serves his time at the same prison in which “Raffa” languishes, contemplating her catastrophic three-day romance. “With the mistake I made,” she says, “I deserve to die.”