

# Honour killings in Canada: even worse than we believe

Gerald Caplan : 5-7 minutes : 7/23/2010

---

If you are already sufficiently appalled knowing there've been 12 despicable "honour killings" in Canada since 2002, don't read any further. This is only the tip of a nightmarish iceberg, I'm afraid.

For some reason, the term honour killings seems to be reserved for murders committed by male family members against daughters or sisters in South Asian or Middle Eastern communities. These unimaginable crimes have been receiving much high-profile notoriety in the Canadian media, as they surely deserve. All Canadians must now know of the tragic murder of 16-year old Aqsa Parvez of Mississauga, strangled to death three years ago by her brother and father.

But I'm confident that not one in a million is aware that in Ontario alone, from 2002 until only 2007 (the latest data), 212 women have been killed by their partners. That's 42 every year, compared with 12 so-called honour killings in all of Canada in the past eight years. Women killed by partners are known as domestic homicides, and, unless especially gruesome, are barely worth a mention in the media. Maybe there's just too many of them to be newsworthy.

The data comes from the Ontario Domestic Violence Death Review Committee, which I didn't even know existed until it was recently cited in the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives' *Monitor*. I've never come across these figures anywhere else.

Let me rush to be clear here. I don't for a moment minimize the horror of 12 girls and women in Canada murdered by members of their immediate family. To steal a phrase, one would be far too many.

There is no conceivable excuse or justification for doing anything but condemning such murders in the most unequivocal way. There is no cultural tradition, no sensitivity to the different values of other societies, that can ever justify or even "understand" how a father or brother can kill their daughter or sister, or how a mother can be a sympathetic witness to such a savage act. It is beyond any rational understanding.

What accounts for the high profile of these relatively small number of murders in Canada? Why do we know little or nothing about the larger epidemic of women killed, almost routinely it sometimes seems, by boyfriends or husbands? Is it less terrible to be strangled to death or shot or have your throat slit by them than by family members? Is it just too commonplace to bother paying attention to? Do we still harbour that sneaking suspicion that women murdered by partners have somehow brought it on themselves?

Yet both kinds of murders have a common root. Both are honour killings, reflecting a twisted, pathological male sense of honour. Both are executed by men who feel they haven't received their due deference, men who consider "their" women, whether daughter or partner, to be their chattel, to do with as they choose. Have we smug white Canadians forgotten that you don't have to be a Muslim or South Asian to regard women this way?

Or do we focus on so-called honour killings precisely because the victims are Muslims, or South Asians, or Middle Easterners? By giving such prominence to these communities and their cultures, are we not denigrating

them? For all our ostensible acceptance of multiculturalism, are we not feeding our lingering prejudices against certain specific minorities among us? Look at it purely statistically. If so-called honour killings are in fact culturally approved by their communities, as is often charged, shouldn't we expect far more than 12 in the entire country in eight years? And if the rest of us truly embrace a culture that repudiates violence against women, why are so many of them still being murdered?

Let me again emphasize that I have no illusions about these dark issues. According to the United Nations, there are a staggering 5,000 instances annually of women and girls being shot, stoned, burned, poisoned, buried alive, strangled, smothered or knifed to death by family members. I can barely write the sentence without getting sick to my stomach. The killers are fathers, brothers, sons, uncles, and yes, even mothers. The disgusting deeds are carried out in the name of preserving or protecting family honour. Most such murders are indeed carried out in the Middle East or in the countries of South Asia - India, Bangladesh, Pakistan - or by South Asians or Middle Easterners living elsewhere. These terrible crimes can never be "understood," justified or condoned. They must be stopped, wherever they happen.

But terrible things still happen to women everywhere, as the domestic violence figures for Canada demonstrate. No nation, religion, class or ethnic group has the monopoly on misogyny. Honour killings should be seen not as uniquely evil but as the most extreme and perverse proof of this truth. That's why it's encouraging that women's equality groups have been so vocal in their denunciations of all violence against women and are supporting women in minority communities to give them the strength to stand up for their rights.

Despite the remarkable progress women have truly made in the past half-century, clawing for every inch of it, the struggle for women's equality can never rest. It simply has too many enemies, always fighting to keep women in their place, where they belong, dead or alive. Young women who dismiss feminism as irrelevant or outdated are, I'm afraid, dead wrong. The struggle is never over.