

Honour Killings

Alasdair Soussi / March 1, 2005 / 5 min read : 7-9 minutes

When a young female reporter joined the staff of *The Jordan Times* in 1993, “honour” killings were a dirty secret, a subject conveniently ignored by the masses. No one spoke of the cruelty that surrounded such deaths, nor of the women whose lives were brutally and wantonly cut short. Indeed, in a society dominated by masculine principles, they were, in essence, Jordan’s forgotten victims.

For Rana Hussein, however, then newly assigned to the paper’s crime beat, “honour” killings provided a suspiciously uncomfortable amount of copy. Not content with just glossing over the issue, she took on the mantle of uncovering this silent-but-deadly aspect of Jordanian life.

“An incident in 1994 involving a 16-year-old girl shocked me the most,” says Hussein, speaking of the story that sparked her initial interest. “It was the beginning of my career, and I covered this story, which involved the death of this girl at the hands of her 31-year-old brother. She was killed because she was raped by her other, 21-year-old brother, who put sleeping pills in her tea before carrying out the rape, threatening to kill her if she told her family. But she became pregnant, so she had to tell. So, he tried to kill her and she survived, but underwent an abortion. Later on, she was married off to a man 50 years older than her, but that only lasted six months. And, on the day he divorced her, she was killed by her brother, to cleanse the family name.

“When I went to talk to her uncles, who plotted the murder, I asked them why they helped to kill her if she was raped, and why they punished her. And they said she seduced her brother to sleep with him. Then I asked them why she would want to sleep with her brother when there were other men on the street, and they began criticizing me for the way I was dressed (Hussein favours western-style jeans and t-shirts over more traditional Arab women’s wear), for not being married, and other things of this sort.”

It was only after *The Jordan Times* published her story, retaining all the undesirable details of the case, when she realized the strength of opposition that existed in Jordanian society towards the public disclosure of such crimes, which, according to official figures, reportedly claim at least 25 lives each year.

“One of the criticisms I received was from an intellectual Jordanian woman who worked in a high position and had studied abroad,” says Hussein, whose self-gathered crime statistics reveal that “honour” killings amount to one-third of all violent deaths in Jordan. “She called the newspaper and started screaming and yelling at my editor, saying that they should stop me from writing about these crimes because I was tarnishing the image of Jordan.”

This view and other similar opinions, she says, made her furious, and propelled her to find out the truth behind these killings, which, say analysts, have their roots in local custom, not Islam. She visited court proceedings and analyzed the manner in which vulnerable women were treated by the judicial system.

“I discovered these killers were getting away with very lenient sentences,” says Hussein, still with a note of disgust in her voice. “And then I also discovered that women who survived these attacks were being put in

prison [at the women's correctional facility in Amman] for their own protection. I was outraged."

The next few years saw Hussein take the lead on many public awareness campaigns, where she attempted both to change people's attitudes and to amend the law—a move that earned her the Human Rights Watch Award (2000) and the Reebok Human Rights Award (1998).

"We held several activities in 1999 and 2000 where we received 15,000 signatures demanding the cancellation of laws that discriminates against women," she says. "The government introduced changes to Article 340 [of the Jordanian penal code] but that, in my view, was the wrong article to target, as it was not applied in court to "honour" crime cases. This law, which stipulates that a man benefits from a reduction in penalty if, after witnessing his wife in an adulterous affair, kills one or both of them, has only been used once. It was Article 98 that we wanted the government to take action on, as the elasticity of this article means that the judge can use it in whatever way he wants."

She laughs ironically, before continuing: "And this is the article [98] that is used in all 'honour' crime cases. In fact, since I began my career, I have never seen a judge use Article 340. So, because of Article 98, which allows for a reduced sentence if a man kills in a fit of fury, killers are still only getting sentences from three months to two years."

Hussein, a born-and-bred Jordanian, gained both her bachelor's and master's degrees from Oklahoma City University before returning home and taking up employment at *The Jordan Times*, the country's only English-language daily. Hussein's years abroad, however, gave rise to accusations that she picked-up "foreign" ideas about women in America, though such criticisms have been strongly contested by various high-profile figures who have thrown their weight behind Hussein's campaign.

"[Hussein] almost single-handedly brought this ['honour' crime] problem to the attention of the public," wrote Queen Noor, wife of the late King Hussein of Jordan, in her autobiography, *Leap of Faith*. "Many criticised her work and motives, and some even sent hate mail and threats. But Rana persisted."

Hussein is encouraged by the positive results yielded by her and her comrades' activities—the government's introduction of the Family Protection Project in 2000 being one such triumph—and is optimistic about seeing a significant decrease in "honour" killings within the next 20 years.

"[Jordanian] society is changing, especially since now both men and women work," she says. "It's not like the old days. Many men now look for women [to marry] who work, rather than women who are sitting at home. So things are changing, and, when it comes to 'honour' crimes, there is a lot more public awareness than there was 10 years ago. But, of course, in every society when you want to change something, you'll face resistance. Sometimes I get accused of being used by the West, of being a western agent, but I'm sorry, I don't need anyone in the west to tell me that killing a woman is wrong."

Alasdair Soussi is a freelance journalist from Scotland specializing in Middle Eastern affairs. He has written for numerous publications worldwide. His recent work includes an in-depth investigation into the plight of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon's largest refugee camp, Ain el Hilweh, and an interview with Hezbollah's leading political official in South Lebanon.

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