

Feminist Reflections on Researching So-called ‘Honour’ Killings

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Abstract Drawing on 2 years of field research conducted between 2008 and 2010 in London’s Kurdish community, I discuss the practical and ethical challenges that confront researchers dealing with violence against women committed in the name of ‘honour’. In examining how feminist methodologies and principles inform my research, I address issues of researcher positioning and the importance of speaking with, rather than for, marginalised groups. I then explore the difficulties of operationalising this position when dealing with honour-based violence. Using the interview data from the 2008–2010 study and a case study of the trial of Mehmet Goren (who was convicted in 2009 of murdering his daughter Tulay for supposedly dishonouring their family), I discuss the socio-cultural norms and values underlying honour codes, examining both the position of men and women in relation to the maintenance of family honour and the regulation of women’s sexuality and conduct. In particular, I explore the difficulties inherent in obtaining and understanding victims’ own personal narratives, especially in legal settings, while simultaneously showing how it is only through empowering women to speak for themselves that we will be able to bring about the deep societal changes needed to eradicate honour-based violence.

Keywords Feminist research · Honour-based violence · Honour killings · Personal narratives · Shame · Violence against women · Action-oriented research

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Introduction

In recent years, societies around the world have begun to address the issue of ‘honour’-based violence (HBV),¹ although with varying degrees of commitment (Idriss and Abbas 2010). Societies that subscribe to a value system centred on ‘honour’ consider individuals who offend against the prevailing honour code to be responsible for damaging the honour of their entire family. Since the main consequence of dishonour is “exclusion from the group” (Stewart 1994, 111), this represents a significant threat to the family’s future and even its survival. HBV is seen as a way to preserve or restore a family and/or community’s honour by ‘cleansing’ the shame that caused the dishonour. The punishment ‘required’ to restore a family’s honour varies depending upon the nature of the perceived shame. HBV manifests in numerous forms, including physical abuse (e.g. beatings), sexual abuse, emotional abuse (e.g. coercion), psychological abuse (e.g. threats) and/or financial abuse (e.g. withdrawal of financial support).

Although honour has multiple connotations and overlapping meanings relating to respect, esteem, dignity, reputation and virtue, most societies with honour systems equate it with the regulation of women’s sexuality and the avoidance of deviation, especially on the part of women, from social norms and traditions. As a result, most victims of HBV are (young) women, while most perpetrators are men. Yet, unlike with most other forms of violence against women (VAW), the perpetrators of HBV are typically the woman’s blood relatives or in-laws: usually, the victim’s father, brother(s), or uncle(s), though female relatives may also be involved (usually the victim’s mother or mother-in-law).

Between 2008 and 2010, I was a member of a research team that conducted an extensive study of HBV in both Britain and Iraqi Kurdistan² (see Begikhani et al. 2010). Below, I examine the practical and ethical challenges inherent in this work, particularly as regards operationalising feminist principles concerning the importance of speaking with, rather than for, marginalised groups and persons. I then discuss the study’s findings, using them to illuminate how existing approaches to understanding and addressing VAW as it relates to issues of honour might be advanced through an exploration of how personal narratives can challenge political and academic debates that associate particular forms of VAW with black and minority ethnic communities. The discussion is deepened through an exploration of how these issues play out in practice; in this I draw a case study of the trial of Kurdish immigrant Mehmet Goren, who was convicted in 2009 of murdering his daughter for supposedly dishonouring their family.³ This case study illuminates both the difficulties inherent in obtaining and understanding victims’ own personal narratives, especially in legal settings, and how vital it is to empower women to

¹ ‘Honour’ is enclosed in speech marks here, and elsewhere, to stress (and re-stress) the questionable nature of applying this term, with all its positive connotations, to violence and murder.

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³ *R v Mehmet Goren, Ali Goren and Cuma Goren* [2009].

speak for themselves if we are to bring about the complex societal changes needed to eradicate HBV.

The Role of ‘Honour’ in Kurdish Communities

The world over, the concept of honour generally has three facets: it is “a sentiment, a manifestation of this sentiment in conduct, and the evaluation of this conduct in others” (Pitt-Rivers 1971, 21). In other words, it comprises not only a person’s estimation of his own worth, but also the acknowledgement of that claim by society through recognition of his right to pride. However, honour has different meanings in different societies; this renders its analytical usefulness questionable. For this reason, Wikan (2008) contends that shame is a more informative concept: individuals in communities that prize honour are motivated by a desire to avoid this opposing negative attribution. Moreover, the concept of shame is easier to measure as it necessarily involves an action or series of actions, whereas honour is a broad category that defies classification. However, the specific acts that are deemed to increase or erode honour, causing shame, are subject to constant contestation and change. They vary even between Kurdish communities in both the diasporic context and Kurdish homelands.

All honour codes are based on the expectation that individuals and groups constantly strive to preserve their honour (*namus* or *sharaf* in Kurdish/Arabic) to avoid shame (*a’ib* in Kurdish/Arabic) (Hague et al. 2012). However, the oppression that individuals—especially women—face as a result of honour takes different forms depending on their geographical location, the prevailing regional culture, and their family’s relative socio-economic status (Dobash and Dobash 2000). For example, in some Kurdish families women’s participation in professional and/or academic pursuits is seen to add to the family’s honour. In others, having a sister or daughter working outside the home is a source of shame. As such, gender-role expectations vary widely, ranging from the extremely patriarchal to the comparatively egalitarian (Mojab and Abdo 2004). Critically, honour and shame remain dynamically interrelated in that honour “has to be continually reaffirmed in practice, reinforced in action, defended against challenge and re-won and advanced in competition” (Mandelbaum 1998, 23).

In modern Kurdish communities, men are responsible for acquiring honour for their families, while women are seen as potential producers of shame (Pitt-Rivers 1971, 42):

A woman is dishonoured, loses her virginity, with the tainting of her purity, but a man does not. While certain conduct is honourable for both sexes, honour and shame require conduct in other spheres, which is exclusively a virtue of one sex or the other. It obliges a man to defend his honour and that of his family, a woman to conserve her purity [.]

Anthropological research demonstrates that the honour system punishes women for harming honour, but does not glorify them when they validate or elevate it (Stewart 1994). As women’s behaviour either upholds or damages men’s honour, thus

garnering shame, women are placed in a secondary position that is reinforced by their exclusion from the public domain (Stewart 1994). It is partly for this reason that Kurdish women's major life decisions are usually determined for them by male relatives. Indeed, women's attempts to make their own choices are often seen as selfish and, thus, shameful.

Women are often relegated to a secondary position in research as well as society (Wikan 2008) because, to date, the literature has viewed honour as primarily associated with patriarchal systems. Like their male counterparts, Kurdish women seek redress for slights to their family's honour. Yet, women's actions have been overlooked as a means of restoring both their family's honour and their own individual worth within the community. This is largely because their means for achieving these goals are subtler than those available to men, due to their comparatively more limited material and social resources. Adopting methods that allow these women to speak for themselves and reveal their own personal narratives can do much both to mitigate their marginalisation in research and to illuminate new ways to address HBV.

Introducing a Post-colonial Feminist Research Methodology

Between 2008 and 2010, I was part of a project commissioned by the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government and carried out by a consortium of researchers from the University of Roehampton and the Centre for Gender and Violence Research at the University of Bristol, working in partnership with Kurdish Women's Rights Watch.

Ethical approval was obtained from the ethics committees of both universities, which also provided ethical oversight throughout the study; this extended to the research protocols, including the oral consent procedures. However, approval of and adherence to protocols is not sufficient to ensure ethical conduct. Even the most careful researchers and diligent ethics committees cannot anticipate all the dilemmas that may arise in the course of a project, particularly one involving work in a conflict zone (Lincoln and Tierney 2004). The research team took care to consider both the general and specific ethical issues involved, especially those associated with publishing our findings. For instance, we agreed that it was important that all of our publications on the project stress that HBV is a widespread phenomenon. Kurdish communities must not be singled out or stigmatised simply due to the fact that they were the focus of our study.

Another of our core ethical concerns revolved around our desire to employ feminist methodologies that aim to reduce the power imbalances between researchers and their participants. Working in the context of a region such as Iraqi Kurdistan raises questions about how we, as researchers, represent our female participants. This is particularly important in terms of the extent to which we might inadvertently become complicit in perpetuating dominant understandings of the issues at stake, even those that both we and our participants wish to challenge and critique. If we are to encourage change, we must do more than pay lip-service to issues concerning the complex power relations between local people and outsiders.

As an activist working on VAW issues, I am in the advantageous position of being able to collaborate with various grassroots organisations. At the same time, I am an 'outsider within' (to borrow a term from Collins' seminal article) the VAW sector in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (Collins 1986). Even as a feminist researcher working from a marginalised position within traditional British institutions and research paradigms, I enjoy a comparatively privileged position, including the capacity to articulate my perspectives in publications and in on-going interactions with development-planners, policy-makers, members of the criminal justice system, and other public decision-makers. This engagement with both the authorities and grassroots organisations affords me unusual insights as regards the work of the many different actors striving to address VAW in general and HBV specifically.

A key tenet of feminist research is that studies should improve the situation of the group(s) under examination. Research topics are often chosen and investigated, and findings published, with the express intention of changing public policy and advancing social justice. As Harding (1987, 127) writes, "feminist politics is not just a tolerable companion of feminist research but a necessary condition for generating less partial and perverse descriptions and explanations." In line with these principles, our study explicitly aimed to contribute to initiatives designed to tackle VAW. With this goal in mind, the research team recognised the importance of ensuring that every aspect of the project was attuned to the particularities of the context under study.

The notion that "the personal is political" is a central principle in feminist research (Skinner et al. 2005), not least because conducting socio-cultural research from a feminist perspective encourages the interrogation of one's own "politics of location" (Mohanty 1987, 31): "the historical, geographic, cultural, psychic and imaginative boundaries that provide grounds for political definition". Reflexivity is essential, especially when working on sensitive topics such as VAW (Kitzinger 2007; Ramazanoğlu 2002), both for recruiting participants and for encouraging them to speak openly and honestly in interviews. Demonstrating a commitment to deep introspection, and to interrogation of one's own cultural position, can be critical in building sufficient trust for participants to disclose deeply personal information. Therefore, at the start of each interview, the interviewer explained the aims and objectives of the research and also her position in relation to the project.

The feminist philosopher Alcoff (1991) argues that in order to conduct ethical research that speaks to participants' experiences in a truthful way, researchers must demonstrate their commitment to fostering dialogue with participants in order to speak *with* them, rather than *for* or *about* them. Spivak (1988) also calls for a 'speaking with' approach that neither denies the researcher's discursive role nor presumes to present an authentic account of the experiences of research subjects, especially those located in socio-politically subordinate positions. Instead, this approach is designed to allow participants to contribute to the construction of knowledge, especially when it takes the form of a socio-historical narrative. Thus, the ethics of speaking with participants requires sensitivity, reflexive and reflective examination, relationship building, and ethical accountability between researchers and their research participants. Although engaging in critical reflexivity often means exposing one's own vulnerabilities (Gajjala 2002), Behar (1996) suggests that

writing in a vulnerable fashion can actually convey authority, especially when the writer actively hopes to improve the situation of a vulnerable group. Speaking with those working on VAW issues in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, and also the Kurdish diaspora, provided opportunities (albeit ones fraught with social and political difficulties) to raise awareness of (1) the importance of accountability as regards existing efforts to tackle VAW, and (2) how new measures might be developed to address the socio-cultural power dynamics that underpin the persistence of VAW, and particularly HBV.

As Alcoff (1991) cautions, people are not equal in terms of their politics of location; this is particularly true with respect to how knowledge is generated and who is in a position to voice it. We are living in what Lather (1991) describes as a powerful post-colonial moment in world history. In many aspects of our work, as well as in our day-to-day lives, it is impossible to ignore the powerful and persistent legacy of European colonial expansion in South Asia and, more recently, the Middle East. Those located in these spaces may be seen as exotic, inferior or ‘other’—or may be rendered completely invisible. Patterns of domination were so strongly embedded during the colonial period that, when perpetuated by those whose interests they still serve, we are often blind to their continuing prevalence. For this reason, research methodologies must be sufficiently sensitive to respond to these issues.

When privileged persons speak on behalf of those who are less privileged, this often reinforces the *status quo*. Liberal white feminists, for instance, often seek to speak for feminists of colour because they believe that this will provide a space for such women’s voices to be heard; however, they often fail to recognise that there are appropriate times to step aside so that the marginalised can speak autonomously (Hooks 2000). Our research team sought to engage with post-modern notions of difference and diversity through recognising (1) that many VAW experts are women from the ‘First World’, and (2) that the simple label ‘women’ cannot, in this instance, be assumed to signify a unifying category symbolising a shared group identity of comparatively marginalised, repressed, vulnerable and poorly represented people. As Pearson and Jackson argue (1998, 7), those who claim to be, or to speak for, “women of the [global] South” must take care not to “(mis)represent the diverse positions of different women, nor to collapse their complex and multiple social identities into a simplistic notion of collective gender identity”. Thus, feminist post-colonial critiques argue the need to re-examine the implications of initiatives, policies and research involving what Spivak refers to as “white women saving brown women from brown men” (1988, 93).

Although ‘speaking with’ allows researchers to write from a position of engagement and sensitivity, Goodall (2008) stresses the need to pay attention to how research is reported, particularly as regards the representation of participants. The ways in which a writer chooses to represent others is not just a question of methodology but one of ethics. Both Shome (1999) and Goodall (2008) suggest bringing the ‘researched’ and the ‘self’ into the writing of ethnographic work. Indeed, Fine (1992) rejects the ‘ventriloquism’ of researchers who hide behind the voices of others, denying the ‘I’ of the text and the political nature of their work. This is vital in action-oriented research, such as this study, which presents exciting

possibilities, but also some thorny dilemmas. Among the many challenges associated with action-oriented research is the very real possibility that even the best-intentioned researchers will assume a maternalistic position, seeing it as part of their job to raise awareness among women experiencing gendered forms of violence. This may, inadvertently, reinforce existing structures of power and inequality. Thus, many of the research projects I have been involved in have focused on integrating research and action in recognition of the fact that the “personal is political” (Skinner et al. 2005). The research strategies employed focused on using narratives of women’s lives, and their struggles in relation to violence, to contribute to a vision of how to bring about social change.

Moreover, a true ‘speaking with’ approach involves engaging in more than simple dialogue and, instead, attending to the embodied experiences of participants. Bodies are not bound to the private sphere but are very much present in the political, cultural and social realms, existing as contradictory sites of colonisation and decolonisation, oppression and empowerment (Eisenstein and Jardine 1985). Grumet (1988, 3) describes bodily knowledge as “a secret everybody knows” in that *how* we know about and experience the world involves much more than cerebral processes. The concept of embodiment stresses the multiple ways in which our lived experiences of the world are inherently physical. It is through the locations, sensations and actions of our bodies that we interpret perceptual information in order to understand the world; this embodied knowledge is, in turn, manifested in our socio-cultural performances. Thus, living and learning, experiencing and being are dialectical processes involving the psychic and social spheres of existence, with the body continually interfacing between the two (O’Connell and Layder 1994).

Western feminist theories of the female body are often criticised as too abstract by ‘Third World’ feminists, who tend to focus on research participants’ embodied experiences, in specific contexts, of specific acts (e.g. acid violence, rape, so-called ‘honour’ killings, forced/early marriage or female genital mutilation). Indeed, the notion of embodiment is conspicuously absent from traditional, supposedly more objective research methodologies. This is particularly problematic for feminist studies as the female body often lies at the centre of feminist thinking and action. This is especially true in relation to the multiple ways in which female bodies have been talked about, acted on, classified, regulated, controlled, altered and decorated in both the private and public realms (Razack 2004). Honour-based societies locate the bodies of mothers, sisters, daughters, wives and other female relatives at the heart of a family’s reputation. Thus, women’s bodies are key to a family’s position within the community. As a result, embodied experience is vital to understanding the lives of women both within Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora.

Honour and Shame

Seeking to understand HBV through this lens of embodied experience via a ‘speaking with’ approach led us to conduct interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, including both victims and those working to address HBV and VAW.

Between 2008 and 2010, the research team conducted thirty-four semi-structured interviews in London, including eight with police officers, six with lawyers/senior prosecutors, three with officers from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (including one with an officer from the Forced Marriage Unit), one with a teacher who had experience of HBV issues, two with Independent Police Complaints Commissioners, and ten with staff from front-line women's organisations working on HBV issues in Britain. The research conducted in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region involved one hundred and twenty semi-structured interviews with government officials, police officers, staff and volunteers from women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other non-state actors, as well as twelve in-depth interviews with HBV survivors and victims' families. This part of the study was reported in Begikhani et al. (2010). Here, and in the following section, I focus on the interviews conducted in Britain and, thus, on the situation prevailing in the Kurdish community in London.

The interviews conducted with NGOs revealed a general consensus that 'honour' and 'shame' do not carry static meanings in Kurdish society. Instead the meanings of these concepts are contested, ambiguous, dynamic and constantly shifting. Feminist discourses on these issues often explore how shame and honour relate to concepts of patriarchal power that, in turn, revolve around men's exercise of control over women's sexuality and freedom (Akipinar 2003). For instance, the Director of the Kurdish Human Rights Project argued that

There certainly is gendered context ... it is family honour, based on the honour of the female members of the family and so it is much more difficult ... for a man to act in the way that he would dishonour his family because he is not seen as the symbol of honour for the family.

Critical to this statement is the fact that value systems linked to, and legitimised by, notions of honour and shame are not controlled by a central institution: rather, they are spread across a number of key institutions, including the family, kinship networks, religion, and the state.

Thus, in exploring why HBV occurs, a member of the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights Organisation argued that

The underlying purpose of 'honour crimes' is to maintain men's power in families and communities by denying women basic – and internationally recognised – rights to make autonomous decisions about issues such as marriage, divorce, and whether and with whom to have sex, in order to control female sexuality and reproductive function. The 'crime' [that brought shame on the family] does not need to have occurred in reality; community gossip and the loss of reputation is enough of a rationale for murder if it implies a loss of virginity or an act of infidelity [.]

Rumours about a woman's sexual behaviour are often seen as sufficient 'evidence' for male family members to view HBV as not only permissible but necessary. As Husseini (2010) attests, numerous autopsies performed on the victims of 'honour' killings reveal that they were virgins, demonstrating that many such murders are carried out solely on the basis of suspicion. Often HBV can only be avoided if a

woman's virginity can be proven. As one of the Iraqi Kurdish activists who was interviewed declared, victims

are young; they are in this country and they absolutely have all the rights to find their own sexual relations. But they do it in secret and later on, before the marriage, they do this cosmetic surgery: they do the hymen for them again, so that they can bleed in the night of the marriage. It is very prevalent in Sweden, particularly among the Kurdish diaspora, and here as well, even in Kurdistan itself. ... It is all about sex. It is all about a woman's body and sexual purity and particularly virginity is the most important thing in Kurdish mentality.

As Abu Odeh (2000, 370) argues, "The hymen, in this context, becomes the socio-physical sign that both assures and guarantees virginity, as well as gives the woman a stamp of respectability and virtue". Respectable femininity is socially and culturally constructed as revolving around passivity, selflessness and submissiveness, especially in relationships with men (Faqir 2001). Thus, the belief that "women should remain *mastura* (literally meaning hidden, or low profile), a term which implies physical and psychological confinement in the public and private spheres" is common in societies where honour holds significant currency (Faqir 2001, 68).

The London-based activists we interviewed agreed that in Kurdish communities notions of honour speak to key socio-cultural values, with shame often perceived as nothing more than the loss of honour (Mojab and Gorman 2007). The result is that, regardless of her other positive characteristics, an unwed woman must remain a virgin if she and her family are to be considered honourable. Meanwhile, a man's honour is determined by whether his wife, daughters, sisters, nieces and other female relatives preserve their virginity until they are married and remain faithful to their husbands thereafter. Thus, control of women is a key symbol of male power in societies with honour-centric value systems.

Honour killings are a way of publicly displaying this patriarchal power. Indeed, killing for the sake of individual or collective honour is often viewed as heroic in that the re-establishment of the family's credibility in protecting its womenfolk restores the family's honour. As Bourdieu (1977) claims, honour is always lived out openly, before other people. Thus, in many countries where honour killings occur regularly, perpetrators who are arrested proudly display their handcuffs. Some men who have killed in the name of honour even go to the police to voluntarily confess their crimes. Moreover, in Iraqi Kurdistan homicide in response to adultery is often excused by both the legal system and wider society. In such situations, men are routinely considered to be victims of their circumstances. Their crimes are seen as impulsive rather than pre-mediated. This gendered explanation locates the propensity for violence not in men but rather in culturally constituted ways of 'being a man' that link masculinity with aggression (Hearn 2004). The exercise of complete control over female relatives is, in this respect, viewed as a masculine virtue (Erturk 2006).

In an account of one of her earliest experiences of HBV in Kurdistan, an interviewee from the London-based Kurdish Women's Rights Watch described how this plays out in practice:

I was on my way to school in Kirkuk when I saw a crowd of people, with policemen, and blood-stains covering the doorstep of the house and the walls. I asked a boy of my age what was going on. He said, "Ahmad bought his honour." It didn't make any sense to me. I kept on asking him, "What do you mean, 'He bought his honour?'" He said Ahmad had killed his sister. Heading towards my school, questions filled my mind. What is honour? How it could be sold and bought? This incident left me with a deep fear that one day I might face the same. And the feeling that I had to protect myself so my family will be safe.

With such fear abiding amongst girls and women in societies with honour-based value systems the development of effective legal protections, strong support services, and effective measures to investigate and prosecute HBV become key to driving the social changes needed to ensure women's rights are protected and that VAW is eradicated.

Prevention and Protection

So-called 'honour' killings and other forms of HBV occur across the world. They are by no means restricted to the religions of Islam or Sikhism, or tied to any one particular ethnic group (Gill et al. 2012). Nevertheless, the customs and value systems governing particular cultures are often invoked to support such practices. For instance, in criminal proceedings regarding HBV, defendants commonly declare that they were simply following the tenets of Islam, which demands female modesty. In fact, Sharia (Islamic) law forbids the use of VAW (Imran 2005). Thus, it is in spite of religion, rather than because of it, that honour killings occur.

One of the London-based barristers interviewed during the study asserted that "[E]verybody must be ready to respect the culture and conditions of those who have come to this country to make it their home and that is something to be applauded and not to be tampered with." Those who seek to defend HBV, and other practices that discriminate against women, commonly argue that it is only in relation to Western values and norms that these practices are rendered problematic. They contend that attempts to prevent HBV and VAW represent a form of neo-colonialism that seeks to impose Western morals and values on non-Western communities (Spivak 1988). This 'cultural imperialism' is embodied, some argue, in the Western media's 'excessive' focus on the practice of female genital mutilation as a form of torture (Njambi 2004). Indeed, one of the primary justifications for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was the emancipation of women through Western military intervention. However, human rights activists have questioned whether attempts to address HBV in Iraq cloaked a paternalistic attack by the West on the cultural practices of the East. While various forms of HBV, including forced marriage and female genital mutilation, continue to be viewed as important religious and/or cultural practices, states are likely to remain reluctant to acknowledge their patriarchal character (Coomaraswamy 2002). As a result, women's NGOs have a long road ahead in terms of campaigning for states to approach these issues in a way

that does not prize religious and cultural rights over women's fundamental human rights.

At a grassroots level, whether women's NGOs are satisfied with police responses to HBV depends largely on the speed with which the police respond to incidents, and whether they take positive action (i) to alleviate the immediate situation, and (ii) to prevent on-going violence in individual cases. However, police protection is often conditional; the nature and extent of the protection offered in an individual case depends largely on the relevant officer's perception of the incident(s) reported. In Britain, this is because the police are given considerable discretion regarding the most appropriate way to address a specific situation. This enables effective responsiveness to many—but not all—types of crime. Indeed, many of our London-based interviewees discussed working with victims whose contact with the police had left them in greater danger. In such cases, victims' diminished faith in the criminal justice system often engendered unwillingness to call the police in the event of further violence.

All of the members of London-based NGOs interviewed during the study raised concerns about the range of preconceptions many officers hold about the 'typical' black and minority ethnic (BME) victim. Many interviewees discussed experiences that demonstrate that these beliefs exert a powerful influence over whether individual victims are deemed deserving of police assistance (Dobash and Dobash 2000). A longstanding criticism from prosecutors, women's groups and victims of HBV alike relates to the fact that officers routinely dismiss HBV as part of the culture of BME communities, stereotyping both victims and abusers. One interviewee from Kurdish Women's Rights Watch argued that the British criminal justice system still does not understand HBV in sufficient depth: "in Banaz's case the police were not very active in pursuing her calls where she claimed that her dad was threatening her and they did not take her word seriously" (Gill 2009).⁴ Thus, the discretion that police officers have in responding to individual incidents often leads to failures in protecting victims.

This is partly because the police response to a given problem frequently develops at a policy, rather than operational, level. However, in 2010, the Association of Chief Police Officers produced a national strategy on forced marriage and HBV involving guidance, training and risk-assessment tools. Stakeholders have welcomed this strategy as providing a framework that encompasses both policy and practice. Nonetheless, despite the introduction of police training programmes, these have yet to be rolled out consistently to non-specialist officers. Moreover, as an interviewee from Kurdish Women's Rights Watch contended, the police should not only be trained but also tested to see whether they put policy into practice.

⁴ *R v Mahmood, Mahmood, Hama, Ali and Hussain* [2007; 2010] Banaz Mahmood Babakir Agha's family migrated to Britain from Iraqi Kurdistan in 1998. The 21 year old was living in South London when she was strangled with a shoelace in 2006. Banaz's crime was to fall in love with a Kurdish Muslim man from Iran. The couple met at a family gathering, fell in love and decided to elope. This behaviour was perceived as scandalous by Banaz's family. Indeed, her actions became known throughout London's tight-knit Kurdish community. When the family became aware of her intention to elope, Banaz's father held a family council. At this council, Banaz's uncle insisted that her punishment be death. All of the men involved in Banaz's murder believed that their acts of violence were a justifiable response to her 'dishonourable' behaviour.

The evidence on this front is encouraging: police responses to and prosecution rates for HBV cases have improved in recent years, as evidenced by the investigations into the cases of Tulay Goren (discussed below) and Shafilea Ahmed.⁵ As one of the barristers interviewed during our study claimed:

The police seem to be changing their ideas and talk positively about the Tulay Goren case ... [but] it is a shame that some of these cases have had to happen before the police have had a wakeup call People do seem to be much more aware now, but now you have to put all those good wishes into real practice.

Indeed, many interviewees spoke of inconsistencies between policy and practice in addressing HBV. These inconsistencies were linked to retrogressive understandings of the need to ‘respect’ cultural factors, even when these lead to serious crimes. Such problems were perceived as compounded by widespread ‘reverse racism’ among the police and other statutory agencies, leading them to grant cultural rights precedence over women’s rights. For instance, one interviewee from Southall Black Sisters reported that the organisation receives a lot of calls from professionals who say:

I really think I should do more to help this victim but my manager doesn’t feel we should be seen as interfering, and there is this sense of “Well, we have got to be seen to be culturally sensitive: we don’t want to be accused of being racist.”

In London it is clear that, despite the sterling work done by the HBV Working Group, which is led by senior police commanders—and also a major shift in policy following the murder of Heshu Yones⁶—police responses to HBV remain variable. An interviewee from Southall Black Sisters neatly summed up the key problem:

The main gripe I have with all of this [increased] awareness ... is that it is only there amongst a certain level and it is not filtering down. Even in the police force, ACPO [the Association of Chief Police Officers] can come out with

⁵ *R v Iftikhar Ahmed and Farzana Ahmed* [2012] Shafilea Ahmed was born in Bradford shortly after her parents emigrated from Pakistan in 1986. The circumstances under which Shafilea disappeared from her family’s home during the night of 11 September 2003 were treated as suspicious from the start for a number of reasons, not least the documented history of parental abuse. On 4 February 2004, the decomposed remains of a human body were found on the banks of the River Kent near Force Bridge. A DNA match to Shafilea was made on 23 February 2004, but it was only after one of Shafilea’s sisters made a statement to the police in August 2010 that her parents were arrested and charged with Shafilea’s murder. The prosecution claimed that Shafilea’s desire to live a Western life and have boyfriends brought her into conflict with her parents’ traditional Pakistani cultural values and their notions of shame and honour. Both were convicted of Shafilea’s murder and received life sentences on 3 August 2012.

⁶ *R v. Abdulla M. Yones* [2003] Sixteen year old Heshu Yones was murdered by her father, Abdulla Yones, on 12 October 2002. The family had migrated to Britain to escape persecution by Saddam Hussein’s regime in Kurdish Iraq. In Britain, Heshu developed a relationship with a Lebanese Christian man. On the day of the murder, Abdulla chased Heshu from room to room before cornering her and attacking her with a kitchen knife in the bathroom of the family home. He stabbed her eleven times. The last blow was wielded with such ferocity that the tip of the blade broke off when it hit a bone in her neck. At his trial, Abdulla stated that he felt provoked by Heshu’s Western-style dress and Christian boyfriend. Other statements made in his defence suggested that he was “forced to kill” because Heshu had put him in an “untenable position” by making a “stain” on the family’s honour.

what is a great policy – it has and so can the Metropolitan Police – but the frontline officer hasn't got a clue.

The national picture remains bleak despite recent steps in the right direction. The trial of Shafiea Ahmed's parents⁷ highlighted the lack of consistent liaison between the relevant educational services, social services, council-housing support department and police during the period Shafiea was a victim of domestic violence at the hands of her parents. Shafiea's school alerted various agencies about her situation, but more should have been done to protect her. A lack of knowledge on the part of various agencies, and a lack of support for Shafiea, account for some, but not all, of the failures seen in this case. For instance, no consideration was given to why Shafiea was regularly reporting domestic violence but then saying that she did not want the help of the police or social services. Although Shafiea was a teenager living in constant fear of her parents, no thought was given to finding a way to arrest and prosecute her parents without relying upon Shafiea as a witness, despite there being a number of independent persons who could have given evidence about the abuse she was suffering. For instance, school friends and teachers saw visible injuries on Shafiea. Sadly, formal records of this evidence, which could and should have been obtained at the time, were not sought until after her murder.

Things have changed since both Heshu's and Shafiea's death. For instance, victims of domestic violence (including HBV) who are deemed to be at high risk of significant harm are now considered for discussion at regular Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC). However, due to resource constraints, only a small number of high risk cases can actually proceed to MARAC. Moreover, high risk victims who are not forwarded to MARAC often receive a lower level of intervention than medium risk victims. While medium risk victims may receive support from the Community Beat Manager, high risk cases that do not progress to MARAC remain with the original investigating officer and are not overseen by the Community Beat Manager. This is neither logical nor safe. Hopefully, further developments in this area will resolve these issues.

In moving forwards, we must address the fact that it often takes tragic deaths to focus police officers' attention on the need to remain vigilant to the consequences of not taking positive action when dealing with domestic violence, including HBV. When a woman reports further violence at the hands of family members who have already abused her, the police must employ proactive measures. While difficult, it is not impossible for a domestic incident to be prosecuted without the victim's cooperation, provided that sufficient independent evidence is available. This is often especially important in dealing with victims of HBV, many of whom have been socialised to believe that speaking to outsiders about any family issues shames both themselves and their family as a whole. Indeed, many victims of HBV feel that they are at least partially responsible for the violence they are suffering precisely because they recognise that even false accusations that impugn their honour impact the entire family. This raises specific policing challenges that must be addressed in ways that are culturally sensitive but avoid condoning any sort of violence.

⁷ *R v Iftikhar Ahmed and Farzana Ahmed* [2012].

Reading the Tulay Goren Case Through the Lens of Postcolonial Feminism

The case of Tulay Goren illuminates many of the key social issues underlying women's reluctance to speak out against their male relatives in the face of HBV.

In 2009, Mehmet Goren was convicted of murdering his daughter Tulay.⁸ Mehmet believed that Tulay had dishonoured their family when, in 1998, the 15 year old began a sexual relationship with 29 year old fellow Kurdish immigrant Halil Unal. As Halil was from a different branch of Islam and of a different Kurdish clan-group, Tulay's family and the wider Kurdish community in North London disapproved of the relationship. Tulay's relatives called on her to recognise the shame that her pre-marital sexual activities were bringing to the family. In her witness impact statement at her father's trial, Nuray (Tulay's older sister) stated that

Tulay was caught in the middle of two clashing worlds. At home she was expected to be a dutiful Kurdish daughter, whilst out of the family home she was exposed to a lifestyle that was completely at odds with her upbringing. In 1998 Tulay wanted to leave home. She had grown into a determined girl who knew her own mind. Here again, so much of our tradition and custom stood in the way of what Tulay ultimately wanted.

According to an expert witness for the prosecution, Mehmet convened a 'family council' when Tulay not only refused to stop seeing Halil but insisted that she would marry him when she came of age. Historically, in the tribal areas of rural Turkey where the Goren family originated, such a situation required the girl's family to meet with the head of the village and other community elders to decide how she would be punished for shaming her family. In the modern diasporic context such community councils are often replaced with family councils comprised of a small group of male relatives. In Tulay's case, the prosecution argued that the Goren family council included Mehmet and his brothers, Cuma and Ali. The prosecution maintained that the three brothers decided that it was their duty to salvage the besmirched 'honour' of the family by murdering Tulay and, if possible, Halil as well. They set a trap for the lovers in early January 1999. Although Tulay managed to warn Halil of the danger, she was never seen again.

Following 10 years of silence, Hanim Goren, Tulay and Nuray's mother, agreed to testify against her husband. Refusing to hide behind a screen to protect her identity, Hanim told the jury that her marriage to Mehmet had been arranged by her parents and that he had been an abusive husband and father: "For 30 years I have kept a lot of things inside me. Only I know, and God knows," she told the court. Hanim went on to speak about the events that led up to her daughter's disappearance and presumed murder. In a voice filled with raw pain, Hanim described how, months before the murder, Mehmet made two separate attempts to kill Tulay, first by gas and then by rat poison. The last time Hanim saw her daughter was the night before she disappeared: "In the children's bedroom I saw Tulay lying on the floor face down. Her hands and her feet were tied. Her hands and her feet were all a purple

⁸ *R v Mehmet Goren, Ali Goren and Cuma Goren* [2009].

black colour.” At one point during the trial, Hanim looked directly at her husband and screamed, “Look at my face. Tell me what you did to Tulay!”

Tulay’s case reveals the need to create opportunities for Kurdish women to speak out against HBV. Patriarchal narratives underpin the expectation that women will spend their lives under the guardianship of a close male relative so that their behaviour may be constantly scrutinised. This is due to the fact that women are symbolically (and, to an extent, *literally*) viewed as the vessels that ‘hold’ the family’s honour (Gill 2009), while men are seen as responsible for guarding them against any behaviour that might be seen as shameful. As a result, women are often objectified in relation to notions of family honour to the point where they are perceived as mere commodities. As Mojab and Gorman (2007) suggest, at the time of marriage the ‘ownership’ of a woman transfers from her immediate male blood-relatives to her husband, who assumes rights over her actions and her body. In Kurdish society it is common for a marriage to include a ‘bride price’ for precisely this reason. Similarly, women are often exchanged between clans and tribes (1) to settle disputes over land, (2) to resolve disputes regarding the defilement of a man’s honour, or (3) in lieu of blood money (i.e. monetary compensation for a killing).

As commodities, women are rarely allowed a public voice. Indeed, they are expected to refrain from protest even in the private realm. Thus, women are continually prevented from speaking out and challenging the gendered power relations that determine the course of their lives. Both Nuray and an expert witness for the prosecution explored these themes in seeking to explain why it took so long for Hanim to speak out against her husband. As Nuray argued in her witness impact statement, “In taking this action, [Hanim] has confronted and accused the men of our family. No one should fail to realise what this means within our culture. These people do not forget.”

Many factors contributed to Hanim’s initial reluctance to speak out, including the fact that not only was she a victim of domestic violence herself, but she had nowhere to go with her three remaining children. That Hanim did eventually agree to testify against her husband demonstrates that her original unwillingness to come forwards was influenced not by a lack of agency, but rather uncertainty over how to do so safely. Her ultimate tenacity belies the notion that victims of HBV are passive. As Minow argues (1993, 1431), “describing yourself as a victim has a self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating feature; and yet, failing to acknowledge or assert one’s victimisation leaves the harm unaddressed and perpetrators unchallenged”. However, legal narratives often fail to capture the lived experiences of BME women who are subjected to HBV. New, more complex narratives about VAW are needed if their testimony is to be fully understood and not discounted as unreliable or incomplete from an evidentiary perspective. As West (1995, 81–82) states,

Women’s subjective lives are different from men’s. [O]f more direct concern to feminist lawyers, the quantity of pain and pleasure enjoyed or suffered by the two genders is different ... [thus] it is not really surprising that the injuries we sustain are trivialised or dismissed by the larger legal culture. ... The strategic inference that I draw is this: if we want to enlist the aid of the larger legal culture, the feel of our gender-specific pain must be described before we can hope to communicate its magnitude.

Research suggests that there are four key reasons why BME women do not report abuse. While these reasons parallel those cited by non-BME women, they often manifest in context-specific ways that provide insights into BME women's decision-making processes in relation to reporting abuse. First, many victims feel betrayed by their abusers, who are often family members or members of the same community (Gupta 2003). Second, BME women are often particularly fearful that the authorities will dismiss their accounts, especially since the criminal justice system struggles to prosecute in cases where the only evidence is the victim's testimony (Munro and Kelly 2009). Third, some BME women believe that minor assaults are 'not violent enough' to warrant reporting. Finally, professionals report that, in comparison to their white counterparts, for whom shame tends to take on a more personal character, BME victims often see themselves as responsible for both their families', as well as their own, loss of 'honour'; they experience heightened feelings of shame. Indeed, Kurdish women are socialised to believe that they are usually to blame for any violence they experience, especially when it is triggered by dishonour brought about by their own actions or perceived actions (Begikhani et al. 2010).

Shame brings about feelings of humiliation and indignity and, thus, of being exposed as defective in the eyes of others. This, in turn, increases victims' sense of vulnerability (Gill 2009). The wish to conceal this lies at the heart of many women's silence about the violence they have experienced. Moreover, Kurdish women are socialised not to discuss private matters with outsiders, seeing this, in itself, as shameful. They often find it very difficult to talk about their experiences even with trained professionals. The situation is complicated by the fact that, because behaviour that encourages harmony in the home is held in high regard in Kurdish society, many women are reluctant to complain for fear of being seen as trouble-makers. Just as negative family and community responses encourage women to remain silent about abuse, positive ones often play a crucial role in enabling BME women to discuss their experiences of violence.

When she decided to speak out, Hanim told the police that for many years she had been too afraid to discuss Tulay's disappearance at all. Indeed, although her testimony proved crucial in securing Mehmet's conviction, Hanim was too afraid to attend court again afterwards. Moreover, giving evidence against her husband caused serious repercussions for her within London's close-knit Kurdish community. A week before Mehmet's trial ended, the police installed additional security measures in the home that Hanim shared with Nuray to protect them against possible reprisals.

Reductive conceptions of culture are partially responsible for the elision of the voices of women like Hanim. Too often multiculturalism has been applied in such a way that policies and practices have failed to interrogate the norms and values of different cultures. There is an assumption that cultural diversity and sensitivity require these norms to pass uncontested, even when they are in conflict with fundamental human rights (Patel 2008). Many of the discussions on multiculturalism in Britain have focused on determining under what circumstances the State should intervene in the socio-cultural practices and traditions of minority communities (Phillips 2013). However, instead of talking purely about culture, perhaps we should be talking about the intersection of culture with gender. Many of

the issues over which British society as a whole feels the State should intervene concern the infringement of *women's* human rights. Thus, the issue is one of gender equality as much as it is of culture.

The British policy of multiculturalism ignores many of the warnings flagged up by feminist writers about the ways in which current VAW-related practice and policy marginalises BME victims (Gill and Mitra-Kahn 2012). Simplistic notions of multiculturalism that treat minority communities as homogenous have given rise to responses to VAW that are often far removed from real needs, especially considering the complexities of individual victim's circumstances. The murders of Banaz Mahmud and Shafiea Ahmed both illustrate the fact that when the British authorities pay only nominal attention to the cultural context of HBV, they often fail to respond effectively. Not all women drawn into the criminal justice system as a result of violence arrive there for the same reasons, nor do they receive the same treatment. The present approach essentialises women by viewing them as comprising a unitary category and failing to recognise the important differences between them. Critically, it also fails to recognise that BME women may exercise agency in context-specific ways. As a result, BME women are often constructed as passive victims rather than active agents in their own lives.

Through the lens of gender-specific descriptions of pain, the agency of abused women can be reconstituted as always/already active. However, the very concept of agency continues to cause great anxiety across different strands of feminist thought. On the one hand, there is a wish to acknowledge women's oppression; on the other, feminists want to avoid women being framed as helpless victims. The affirmation that women are active subjects who can and do resist the oppression visited upon them is a familiar theme in feminist work (McNay 2003). Drawing on the notion of "freedom in constraint" (2008, 193) McNay suggests a re-conceptualisation of agency as "embodied practice that is realised in different ways through particular configurations of power" (2008, 195) on the basis that "cultural and economic forces play themselves out in daily life as constraints and resources for action" (2008, 156). The result is a creative response that testifies to wider personal latitude than has previously been assumed by victimisation models.

Ultimately, Nuray and Hanim exercised their agency and spoke out against Mehmet, but their agency was not without constraint. Suzuki (Suzuki 2003, 103) explores the nature of 'gender surveillance', and particularly family and community surveillance in which freely circulated rumour and gossip serve to exert power over women's sexuality. Speaking in court about the abuse they had encountered at Mehmet's hands provided a consciously cultivated avenue for Hanim and Nuray to reframe their relations with Mehmet, and to invest themselves with a larger of measure of personal autonomy through seeking justice for Tulay. However, as their testimony was 'unconventional', the prosecution had to bring in an expert witness to decode the narrative and cultural frameworks they employed in telling their stories. Through this 'interpretation', it was possible for Nuray and Hanim to be 'heard' even within the confines of a judicial discourse that would usually, at best, discount their testimony. When they recounted their experiences of abuse and the process they went through in deciding to give evidence against Mehmet, the very construction of their narratives conveyed deeper levels of meaning about their

worldview, beliefs, values and intentions than they could have expressed in abstract terms.

As Tulay's remains have never been recovered, it was largely thanks to Nuray and Hanim's courage that Mehmet was convicted and given a life sentence with a minimum of 22 years imprisonment. This was one of only a handful of murder convictions secured without a body. Ali and Cuma, however, were cleared of all charges. Sentencing Mehmet to life imprisonment, Mr Justice Bean stated, "The term 'honour killing' is convenient shorthand, but is a grotesque distortion of language. There is nothing honourable about such a hideous practice or the people who carry it out" (Hughes 2009).

Following the conclusion of the trial, a senior officer from the Metropolitan Police's Violent Crime Directorate said that the lessons learned from Tulay's case had "galvanised the police to know and understand honour-based violence" (Gill et al. 2012). The research behind this paper aimed to further these efforts, in the widest sense, through exploring how practical and policy approaches to HBV might be advanced. As Rebecca Campbell (2001) argues in *Emotionally Involved*, to understand painful subjects a researcher must recognise the unpleasant emotions generated by hearing unsettling narratives about specific cases involving those vulnerable to violence and the difficulties they have experienced in approaching the state for help. Moving forwards, we must employ more nuanced understandings of VAW if we are to elevate policy responses, ensuring that all women can speak out about their experiences of gender-based human rights violations and be heard.

Conclusion

The challenges of speaking about the 'oppressed' in a manner that is ethical, empowering and non-paternalistic are of particular concern to post-colonial feminists. This is especially true for Western feminists concerned with the problems inherent in attempting to speak *with*, rather than simply *for*, women in BME communities and the developing world. These difficulties are complicated by the methodologies through which Western researchers seek to give voice to marginalised groups. When these methodologies are subjected to rigorous post-colonial analyses that explore and question the assumptions upon which they are built, it becomes clear that many represent a very particular worldview and, more dangerously, rather narrow definitions of 'truth', 'knowledge', 'validity' and 'objectivity'.

Tackling so-called 'honour'-based violence in Britain requires a shift in political thinking. Instead of simplistically conceptualising HBV as *a* cultural tradition common to a range of 'backward' (and, thus, 'othered') societies, the issue needs to be (re-)considered in the context of VAW (that is, *gender*-based violence) and the patriarchal value systems found throughout British society. Arguing that gender is the most significant causal factor does not imply that HBV only afflicts women, but the fact remains that the vast majority of victims are female and the vast majority of perpetrators are male. Moreover, the broader category of VAW is not specific to particular communities within Britain. All women face the possibility of VAW,

though the forms it takes and the socio-cultural factors that underpin it vary across different socio-cultural and socio-demographic groups.

HBV is part of a spectrum of VAW that is premised on the perpetuation of men's control over family and community life. As explored in relation to the murder of Tulay Goren, HBV reinforces patriarchal values through the policing of women's activities and sexual behaviour. This produces a climate of fear and domination primarily directed against women. However, turning a political or media spotlight on forms of VAW that primarily afflict women from BME communities often means that attention is directed to political debates about 'Britishness', and the perceived dangers of non-assimilated immigrant communities, rather than the more important issues of gender equality and human rights.

Shafilea Ahmed's case is also another example of the way in which a series of misjudgements as regards the implementation of domestic violence and HBV policies for dealing with vulnerable adults. It is vital that agencies working with individuals affected by violence in the home constantly review their procedures in order to expand and refine best practice. It is difficult to know whether Banaz, Heshu, Shafilea or Tulay would still be alive today if the agencies that had information about their plight had served them better. At the least, it is important that their cases are carefully considered so that the mistakes that contributed to their deaths may be avoided in the future and other lives may, perhaps, be saved.

However, protecting victims and working to prevent HBV is not merely an issue of police policies and practice. Ultimately, HBV will only be eradicated by social change. HBV is legitimised through the marginalisation of female voices in the face of dominant patriarchal narratives structured around the preservation of male honour. Recognising the moments when Kurdish and other BME women challenge these narratives and the value system that underlies them, provides new avenues for changing the social structures that underpin both HBV and VAW.

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