Much has been written recently about the so-called ‘crimes of honour’ in Jordan. By now, the facts and fiction about those heinous crimes have become widely known. According to official statistics, 25 women on average are killed every year for the sake of their families’ ‘honour.’ The number of deaths that could also be classified as such crimes are recorded as suicides or accidents is much higher. The victims of honour crimes usually do not share a common class background, yet they are mainly unmarried women between fifteen and thirty years of age. The perpetrators are generally male family members, mostly notables, fathers, husbands. Owing to Paragraph 340 of the Jordanian Penal Code, which continues to be in force despite various proposals of amendment, these perpetrators usually are given very lenient sentences of only a few months, or are completely exempted because they are minors, as is the case when younger brothers kill the victims. The satisfactions and despair considered within various wider frameworks: firstly that of violence against women in general, secondly, they can be viewed against the backdrop of the ‘ notion of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’ that are prevalent in Jordanian society. Crimes of honour can also be analysed as a manifestation of the power relationships in a patriarchal social system, or can be placed within a religious context. During research conducted among young, highly educated, mainly middle-class women in Jordan between 1997 and 1999, honour crimes were encountered under different circumstances. Furthermore, at the time, they were the subject of heated debates not only in the media, but also among the population. Instead of restraining facts about those atrocious crimes, the following offers a closer look at how the crimes and the debate about them affected the young women (and men) who were met during the research period.

Reputation and rumours

A very crucial issue became evident during the research period: individual as well as family reputation and rumours play an essential role in the everyday lives of young women. The honour crimes can be related to this. Women, especially during the phase of youth, adolescence and early adulthood, are thought to carry a great deal of responsibility for the reputation of their kin groups within society. While still unmarried, this means they are to safeguard their virginity and behave ‘modestly,’ and once they are married they are expected to remain chaste and modest.

It is important here to show how the so-called ‘crimes of honour’ are not only a way of actually punishing women for their alleged sexual misconduct, but also a means of social control in their role within the system of social control. Women in Jordan have become increasingly visible outside their homes in recent decades and this increased appearance in public ‘seems to have created a greater need for supervision, control, and restrictions. How young have, unmarried, highly educated women working women cope with the tensions inherent in this situation?’

Stories about ‘crimes of honour’ such as that of a young woman who was strangled by her younger brother with a telephone cord because she was talking on a man on the phone, became public knowledge and entered into public discourse. Especially after the instigation of the campaign to abolish Paragraph 340 and the ensuing debate about it, stories like these are often used as a threat to enforce ‘modest’ and ‘chaste’ behaviour among young women. On a less tragic level, this body of narratives includes stories about assaults and harassment, which have considerable impact on the lives of women. On altreatic level, this body of narratives includes stories about assaults and harassment, which have considerable impact on the lives of women. Women who have transgressed existing societal norms of behaviour, they are reinforcing existing control mechanisms and creating new consequences of misconduct. The creation and repeated evocation of this body of narratives, by men and women alike, do, bragging about it to every soul they happen to know. And the poor victims usually feel guilty thinking about the ones that instigate such harassment.

Examples abound. One young woman was sitting next to her brother in a bus. Suddenly the brother, ‘only found in rural areas,’ ‘saw her from behind. The young woman was puzzled, not knowing what to do. She could not just confront the man because her brother was sitting next to her (and would have had the responsibility of confronting the man), and was afraid to tell him what was happening. He then started plaguing her and she did not say anything for a while but kept moving closer to her brother hoping that the man would go away. She did not, and her brother started suspecting that something was going on. He asked her if anything was wrong, but she kept saying no. She thought the situation was fairly obvious. Eventually, the young woman’s brother looked behind him and gave the rude man a threatening look. The rest of the journey home went peacefully.

Change of attitude

Stories of silently bearing harassment is nonetheless not totally indicative of how women are dealing with this issue. In fact, many young women seem to be becoming more self-confident and aware that what happens to them does not have to be endured. And ‘they are more afraid of the man than their own family. Most of the young women interviewed had tribal and social values are highly respected.’ One young woman, however, explained that the topic ‘has become a cliché, but it is an issue that touches each one of us.’

Reconsidered just as another, albeit atrocious form of violence, she asked whether this ‘killing and fighting helps to solve any problem, and whether these acts are honourable’. One young man, like many others, could not relate to the notion ‘honour’ that supposedly was behind these crimes: ‘I would be ashamed of myself, if I even think of killing someone regardless of who he or she is guilty. How can an honourable family tolerate the idea of one of its male members killing his sister or wife out of suspicion? Killing is a sin and condemned by all religions. And it has never been an honourable thing to kill one’s sister out of mere suspicion.‘ A female university student expressed criticism: ‘What’s even worse than the ‘honour crimes’ themselves is the Parliament’s refusal to throw out the article that allows for lighter sentences for people having committed honour crimes.’

Closer to their own experience, however, were incidents of assaults and harassment. Most of the young women interviewed had personally experienced harassment in public, but so wereistinguished by the indignation the young women expressed. ‘I never ever dare to touch her, followed by a shouting at the top of her voice that he knew she was a virgin. She stepped on his foot and confront the harassers audibly, and generally the people around them come to their defence.’ A young woman told me how she was walking through downtown Amman with her ten-year-old cousin. Suddenly, a young man approached them and pronounced some ‘dirty words’ directed at the young woman. She was furious and embarrassed, but at the same time thought that she ought to do something about it. She did not, and her brother started suspecting that something was going on. He asked her if anything was wrong, but she kept saying no. She thought the situation was fairly obvious. Eventually, the young woman’s brother looked behind him and gave the rude man a threatening look. The rest of the journey home went peacefully.

Note 1. See, for example, Lama Abu-Odeh, ‘Crimes of honour and the construction of gender in Arab societies,’ in Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1996). See also: www.amanjordan.org – the website of the Arab Women’s Union (al-markaz al-umma‘i li-l-masadi al-wa‘al ma’lumat hawla a l - mal’am al-da’lal al-ard). See also: www.amanjordan.org – the website of the Arab

Regional Issues

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