The Routledge International Handbook of Domestic Violence and Abuse

John Devaney, Caroline Bradbury-Jones, Rebecca J. Macy, Carolina Øverlien, Stephanie Holt

Murder in the family

Publication details

Aisha K. Gill
Published online on: 18 Mar 2021

How to cite :- Aisha K. Gill. 18 Mar 2021, Murder in the family from: The Routledge International Handbook of Domestic Violence and Abuse Routledge
Accessed on: 30 Nov 2023

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The prevalence of ‘honour’-based violence

The United Nations Population Fund estimates that between 5,000 and 12,000 women are murdered in the name of ‘honour’ each year, primarily in the Middle East and Asia (Manjoo, 2011; Gill, 2014; Gill & Walker, 2020), though according to women’s advocacy groups, the figure could be as high as 20,000; given the difficulty in obtaining accurate data because of underreporting and poor recording, official statistics are understood to be grossly underestimated (see A/HRC/20/16). As a result, it is impossible to determine the true number of ‘honour’ killings that occur globally, or the full extent of ‘honour’-based violence (HBV) more generally. Family members often try to conceal HBV, while many victims are abducted and never reported missing (Manjoo, 2011).

Western countries with large multi-ethnic immigrant communities, such as Britain, began recognising HBV as a significant and growing domestic issue in the late twentieth century. Understanding and awareness of HBV has shifted accordingly, prompting concerted national and international efforts to counter it. In Europe, most reported honour killings occur in South Asian, Turkish or Kurdish communities; however, there have also been cases involving Roman Catholic perpetrators, with varied ethnic backgrounds, in Brazil, Italy and America (Chesler, 2010; Kaplanian & Gill, 2020).

Perpetrators are often part of minority groups even in countries where HBV is prevalent among the majority population; this underscores the significance of economic and social marginalisation as aggravating factors (Kulczycki & Windle, 2011). For example, Sheeley (2007) surveyed a stratified convenience sample from Jordan, a nation with deeply embedded socio-cultural notions of ‘honour’. A third of respondents knew someone who had been threatened with HBV, and 28 per cent knew someone who had died as a result of it. While incidence data do not explain the mechanisms through which cultural concerns with ‘honour’ come to motivate HBV, media reporting too often treats such data as explanatory, attributing responsibility for HBV to specific cultures and minority groups rather than exploring the numerous other factors that lead to these crimes (Begikhani, Gill, & Hague, 2015).
Defining honour and shame

‘Honour’ is a pervasive concept that means different things depending on the time, place and cultural context in which it is used. As a result, attempting to define honour in an all-encompassing manner is highly problematic; the meaning and practical implications of honour are not the same across times or cultures. The issue is further complicated because, today, the term has become synonymous with notions such as fame, reputation and virtue, and is often used as a generic cross-cultural translation for subtly nuanced terms that include īrd (Arabic Bedouin term = honour), izzat (Urdu = honour), namus (Arabic = virtue), zina (Urdu), sharam (Urdu) and sharaf (Arabic). However, in all contexts the term – and its antonym, ‘shame’ – remains evaluative (Pitt-Rivers, 1966), dictating appropriate and inappropriate behaviours within a given community (Gill, 2006; Sennett, 2004; Gill & Walker, 2020).

In a broad sense, honour is a social process that determines and designates social value. Honouring is an action involving two or more parties; it occurs both between individuals, and within groups and subgroups. Thus, any examination of honour requires analysis of the full context. Socialisation into cultural codes, norms and traditions involving honour relies on the idea that maintaining the behavioural expectations embedded in these leads to honour; this, in turn, defines the formation and dynamics of relationships among individuals, as well as between larger groups, shaping broader processes and understandings of honour up to the national and even international level. This process establishes behavioural norms, ways of conferring honour on those who uphold them and also disciplinary actions to punish transgressors. For instance, gaining and maintaining ‘prestige’ involves a group bestowing honour on an individual or subgroup for attributes, characteristics and actions the group values, elevating the individual’s hierarchical standing in relation to others in the group as a reward (Stewart, 1994).

As honour is a dynamic process, it can be both increased and decreased; a decrease or loss of honour is seen to result in ‘shame’. It follows then that honour and shame are not only intimately connected, but form part of a complex system that functions as a powerful motivating force for individuals and groups (Walker, 2018). For instance, shame – which Schliesmann (2012, pp. 48–49) defines as a complex emotion that embodies “feelings of humiliation, embarrassment, and a sense of failure” – occurs largely as a result of an individual failing to measure up to his/her community’s standards and expectations (Miller, 1993). While fear of public judgement and the subsequent loss of honour is often enough to enforce adherence to social norms (Welsh, 2008), violence (or at least the threat of it) is often used as an alternative means of enforcing conformity in order to ‘protect’ honour (Gill & Walker, 2020).

The consequences of losing honour

In cultures centred around notions of honour, aggression is an acceptable reaction to insults and threats to honour. Ethnographic and sociological research on diverse honour cultures, such as Iraqi Kurdistan (Begikhani et al., 2015), Spain (Gilmore, 1987), rural Greece (Safilios-Rothschild, 1969) and Turkey (Oner-Ozkan & Gencoz, 2006), suggests that members of honour cultures consider retaliation a duty when a family member or other associated individual is insulted. Failure to retaliate connotes acceptance of the insult and thus an admission of being unworthy of honour. According to Pitt-Rivers (1966), losing honour by accepting humiliation cannot be repaired by demonstrating excellence. Thus, when someone does not take appropriate action when their honour is threatened, he or she will be subjected to shame by the group. The most effective way to restore tarnished honour is to repudiate the insult by demonstrating a willingness to engage in physical aggression.
Honour killings embody the most extreme form of such aggression (Faqir, 2001; Gill, 2014). The perpetrators’ willingness to take such radical measures offers insight into how seriously the loss of honour is taken; the consequences of not taking action when honour is threatened can include shaming, ridiculing, loss of respect, loss of social resources and even complete ostracism from a family or wider social group (Gill, 2014). In traditional societies, where social mobility is limited and individuals’ social, psychological and material prospects are closely interwoven with those of their family, tribe or clan, ostracism not only means losing social support, but also the material resources necessary for survival. As a result, susceptibility to shame is considered a positive quality, as illustrated by phrases such as ‘having a sense of shame’ (Abu-Lughod, 2011). Thus, shame is not only an emotional consequence of losing honour, but also an important behavioural regulator. This demonstrates how shame and honour represent interlinked dynamic social processes, rather than static attributes, and why the avoidance of shame, and preservation of honour, are key concerns for individuals, families and whole communities.

Honour killings

Gendered violence encompasses HBV, ‘crimes of honour’, ‘crimes related to honour conflict’, ‘crimes of tradition’ and ‘culture-based violence’. The term ‘honour killing’ is used to refer to HBV that results in a person’s death. Some scholars and activists reject the use of these designations altogether, categorising such crimes as domestic violence (Terman, 2010), while others place HBV under the umbrella of violence against women and girls (VAWG). Although most victims are female, HBV is sometimes committed against young men (Oberwittler & Kasselt, 2011). Like women, young men are expected to respect and heed the wishes of more senior, usually older, male relatives (Abu-Lughod, 2011). Subordinate men are most likely to cause dishonour as a result of (1) choosing the ‘wrong’ dating or sexual partner, (2) refusing an arranged marriage, (3) coming out as gay, bisexual or transgender (Ozturk, 2013) and/or (4) refusing to commit an act of HBV (Roberts, Campbell, & Lloyd, 2014). Nevertheless, the majority of HBV victims are female and the majority of perpetrators are male.

Honour killings take many different forms and names; these are often specific to certain cultures and communities. For example, ‘bride burning’ in India (Ahmad, 2008), ‘crimes of passion’ in Latin America (Brinks, 2007) and ‘honour killings’ in Islamic nations (Hellgren & Hobson, 2008). However, all share the same dynamic: women are killed by male family members in an act deemed socially acceptable, understandable, excusable and even desirable. Nevertheless, there are key distinctions between these three forms of violence. In a ‘crime of passion’, the woman’s husband or lover commits the murder in ‘heated’ response to a sense of personal betrayal or anger, whereas honour killings are carried out on a premeditated basis as a symbolic rejection of a perceived dishonourable action in order to prevent the family from being shamed by the group (Sen, 2005).

As ‘honour’ covers a broad variety of concepts and behaviours (Gill, 2009), the violations that may trigger violence are also wide-ranging. Honour killings are most commonly committed against a woman for actual or perceived immoral behaviour deemed in breach of a family and/or community’s honour (Jiwani & Hoodfar, 2012; Gill, 2014); usually this behaviour involves intimate relations with a man, whether that be adultery, sex outside marriage or simply close companionship. As even accusations of immoral behaviour lead to the loss of honour, the truth is often irrelevant and proof is rarely required. Indeed, rumours and gossip are the community’s greatest weapons for instilling shame in men who cannot ‘preserve the purity and chastity’ of their female relatives (Shalhoub-Kevorkian & Daher-Nashef, 2013). As it is seen as
the responsibility of male family members to do so, ‘misbehaviour’ on the part of female relatives tarnishes the honour of the whole family.

Even women who have been raped and/or sexually assaulted can become targets for honour killings. This is because the norms and values of honour cultures focus on maintaining women’s sexual ‘purity’ to ensure that only certain bloodlines are allowed to blend, preventing wealth from becoming diluted by marriage, for instance by ensuring that women from the landed class do not form family bonds with individuals of lower social status. Other common ways honour is seen to be lost such that it can only be restored by HBV include a woman or girl (1) being in the presence of a male who is not a relative, (2) refusing an arranged marriage, (3) falling in love with someone who is unacceptable to the family, (4) seeking a divorce, (5) trying to escape marital violence, (6) presenting herself in a ‘Western manner’ in terms of clothing and/or makeup, (7) staying out late (Papp, 2010) and (8) perceived “defiance and disobedience” (Schliesmann, 2012, p. 48).

Compared to their white counterparts, for whom shame tends to have a more personal character as it is not seen to ‘tarnish’ other family members or the wider community, BME victims living in cultures and communities centred on notions of honour and shame often see themselves as responsible for damaging their loved ones through the real or perceived actions that led to the loss of honour (Feldman, 2010). Thus, many victims feel that they deserve to suffer HBV as punishment for their ‘misbehaviour’. This complicates the issue of speaking out or seeking help. Other cultural norms, including not speaking to outsiders about family affairs, and women being expected to smooth over difficulties through self-sacrifice and repressing their own desires and feelings, also play a role in the low rate of reporting of HBV and other forms of VAWG by BME victims. However, just as negative family and community responses encourage victims to remain silent about abuse, positive responses are integral to enabling them to discuss their experiences of violence (Gill, 2014). Thus, policies and practices geared towards providing support and justice for victims must take account of the specialised needs of BME victims if they are to have equal access to help and redress.

The following sections apply these concepts to the murder of Shafilea Ahmed to examine how culture came to be seen as the key explanation for this crime. However, a critical analysis of racialised interpretations of such murders demonstrates that acceptance of ‘honour’ as the sole justification for the brutal murder of young women perceived to have shamed family members fails to grasp the importance of individual and family dynamics and, critically, how this specific form of violence relates to the broader issue of VAWG, which affects all communities and countries (Gill, 2014).

Shafilea Ahmed

Shafilea Ahmed was born in Bradford, England, on 14 July 1986, shortly after her parents emigrated to the UK from Pakistan. From the age of 15, Shafilea frequently reported suffering domestic violence (Gill, 2014). She attended Great Sankey High School in Warrington until her father removed her from school temporarily in February 2003 for a trip to Pakistan. Shafilea was murdered in the UK in September 2003 at the age of 17. In the year prior to her death, tensions over clashing ‘traditional’ versus ‘Western’ values had intensified between Shafilea and her parents, Farzana and Iftikhar. One of her parents’ complaints was that Shafilea’s circle of friends consisted of mostly Caucasian peers from school, with only a small percentage from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Shafilea’s case was first referred to Warrington social services on 3 October 2002 after another pupil told teachers that Shafilea’s parents had physically assaulted her and prevented her
from attending school. Following this first referral, Shafilea’s social services file notes a mark on her face and the fact that she believed she was going to be sent to Pakistan for an arranged marriage. When Shafilea returned to school five days later, she revealed to her best friend that her mother had threatened a forced marriage. According to the friend, Shafilea’s mother said, “I can’t wait till you go to Pakistan to teach you a lesson” (Gill, 2014), prompting school staff to refer Shafilea to social services again. This time, Shafilea’s social services file noted that her father had forced her to withdraw savings from her bank account, indicating an attempt on his part to exert control over her.

Later in November 2002, one of Shafilea’s friends saw her in a park, carrying her belongings and wearing only a “thin sari”; Shafilea indicated that she was running away from home “because her parents would not let her be” (Gill, 2014). Although the school reported the incident to social services, there is no record of this on file. In a meeting subsequently arranged between Shafilea and her parents by her teacher, Shafilea spoke “quite openly” about wanting “to be able to work and have money and go out” (Gill, 2014). By the end of the meeting, Iftikhar had agreed that Shafilea would be allowed more freedom. However, things did not improve and teachers continued referring Shafilea to social services and suggesting that she should contact Childline (Gill, 2012).

On 18 February 2003, Shafilea’s parents drugged her and took her to Pakistan (Gill, 2014). The trip was cut short in May when Shafilea swallowed bleach (or a similar caustic liquid) and required treatment at a local hospital. The family then returned to the UK. Her mother later told the British police that Shafilea had accidentally ingested the bleach, mistaking it for mouthwash. However, medical practitioners reported that Shafilea’s mouth injury was inconsistent with the action of gargling mouthwash, but was consistent with a deliberate act of swallowing. The most likely explanation is that this was a conscious act of self-harm by Shafilea to frustrate her parents’ plans to force her into marriage. As a result of this injury, Shafilea was no longer considered marriageable and was thus deemed to have shamed her family.

Despite her injury, Shafilea was determined to continue her education and become a lawyer. In September 2003, she commenced a series of courses at Priestly College in Warrington. On the evening of 11 September, she worked at her part-time job until the end of her shift at 9pm, when another employee observed her leaving the premises. She spent the evening at her family’s home in Warrington with her parents and four younger siblings. Her father claims that she was alive, though asleep, when he and the rest of the family went to bed at 11pm. Although Shafilea was due to receive hospital treatment the following day, she was not seen alive again after that night.

Shafilea’s former teacher reported her missing on 18 September 2003, prompting an extensive police investigation into her disappearance. At the time, the primary sources of information were Shafilea’s family, friends and teachers, but significant inconsistencies soon emerged in their accounts. The investigation also revealed the history of school, social services and law enforcement involvement with Shafilea and her family. In December 2003, Shafilea’s parents were arrested on suspicion of abduction. They denied any involvement in their daughter’s disappearance and were released on police bail (see Gill, 2014). 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.

Shafilea’s parents gave a number of press interviews in March 2004, including one broadcast on Newsnight on 2 March. Whereas Farzana remained silent throughout the interview, Iftikhar appeared attentive and focused, distancing himself from Shafilea by referring to her as “the daughter” or “the girl”. When asked about Shafilea’s suicide attempt, he contradicted the medical evidence, stating that his daughter “took a sip” of poisonous liquid. He claimed, “I’m not
a strict parent in any way. . . . I’m as English as anybody can picture me, right. But obviously the police portrayal of me is different . . . we have not been treated fairly” (Gill, 2014). He complained that his family was misunderstood by the police and the public, and feigned being hurt by the suspicion that they were responsible for the death of “the girl”. Rather than making a plea to those responsible for his daughter’s death, he defended his “Englishness”, illustrating the importance he placed on saving face and maintaining honour in the eyes of others. Iftikhar used the word “normal” many times in the Newsnight interview when describing Shafilea, his family, the “holiday” to Pakistan during which Shafilea swallowed bleach, and the night of her disappearance (Gill, 2014). He continuously sought to present his family in a positive light and focused less on the loss of his daughter and more on what he perceived as the unfair treatment directed at him and his family.

Building a legal case

In September 2004, the police submitted a file of evidence to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to determine whether to pursue a case against Shafilea’s parents. Six months later, Mr Robin Spencer QC advised the police that there was insufficient evidence to demonstrate guilt beyond a reasonable doubt and secure a conviction. On 11 January 2008, a coroner’s inquest into the circumstances of Shafilea’s death found that she had been “unlawfully killed” (Warrington Guardian, 11 June 2009). The situation changed in August 2010 when Shafilea’s sister “Alesha” (a pseudonym) was taken into custody on suspicion of having arranged a robbery at her parents’ home. Having requested to speak to officers about another matter, she was interviewed in the presence of her solicitor. During the interview, Alesha claimed that, when she was 15, she and her three surviving siblings had witnessed their parents killing Shafilea on the night of 11 September 2003. “Both of my parents were very controlling and tried to bring us up in the Pakistani Muslim way”, she said, before explaining that Shafilea was the one who was “picked on” the most by their parents (Gill, 2014, p. 185).

One of Alesha’s earliest childhood memories was seeing her mother hitting Shafilea. She stated that her parents attacked her and her sisters on countless occasions, both verbally and physically, and that her parents’ abuse of Shafilea escalated over time. Alesha explained that between the ages of 14 and 17, Shafilea was attacked virtually every day for the most trifling reasons – if she received a text message or phone call from a boy, wore ‘inappropriate’ clothes or associated with white friends at school, Farzana would claim that Shafilea had shamed the family. Alesha described one incident in which her mother hit Shafilea and then shut her in a room without food for two days, only allowing her out to use the toilet: “They knew that they could control us completely through fear” (Gill, 2014, p. 186). Alesha’s testimony allowed the CPS to advance a convincing case against Shafilea’s parents. In September 2011, both were charged with murder. Their trial commenced on 21 May 2012 at Chester Crown Court.

The trial

During the trial, Shafilea’s parents insisted that they had not been involved in their daughter’s disappearance or murder; they also denied claims that they had repeatedly beaten her over a prolonged period.

As a witness for the prosecution, Alesha was called on to describe the night of Shafilea’s disappearance. She recalled going with her mother and brother to collect Shafilea from work. When Shafilea reached the car, they saw that she was wearing a lilac t-shirt and white trousers made
from stretchy material, with ties at each hip. As soon as Farzana saw Shafilea, she complained that her clothes were too revealing. Alesha stated that, when they arrived home, the whole family assembled in the kitchen, with Farzana demanding that they collectively search Shafilea’s bags; this practice was not unusual. Finding some money in Shafilea’s handbag increased Farzana’s anger and she accused Shafilea of hiding the money and pushed her, placing both hands on her daughter’s chest and shoulders to shove her onto the settee in the sitting room. Alesha stated that Shafilea, still weak from her injuries as a result of the bleach, had a small frame and weighed not much more than five or six stone (31–38 kg). Alesha then heard her mother say “Etay khatam kar saro”, Punjabi for “just finish it here”. Iftikhar went to Shafilea and pulled her into a lying position on the settee. Shafilea began to struggle as both parents hit her and held her down. One of them said, “Get the bag”. Alesha saw her mother grab a thin white carrier bag from the stool next to the settee; she and Iftikhar together forced the entire bag into Shafilea’s mouth. Each placed a hand over her mouth and nose. Shafilea’s legs kicked, but Iftikhar put his knee on the settee to pin her down until she stopped struggling (Gill, 2014, pp. 186–187).

Despite having seen her sister die the night before, Alesha told the court that the following morning she asked her mother where Shafilea was. Alesha and her siblings were sternly instructed that, if anyone asked, they were to say that Shafilea came home from work, went to bed, then ran away during the night. Alesha and her siblings were sent to school as normal, where Alesha broke down and told some friends what had occurred; she described being very upset and confused at the time and, as a result, spontaneously blurted out that her father had killed her sister. When her teachers asked her about this, she recanted out of fear of reprisal from her parents. Questions remain as to why those who witnessed Alesha’s breakdown at school did not take further action to investigate Shafilea’s disappearance; why did the teachers only contact the police on 18 September 2003, days after Alesha’s admission?

Eight weeks into the trial, Farzana changed her defence in what the judge described as a “significant” development (Gill, 2014, p. 187). On 8 July 2012, she admitted that an incident of “violence” involving Shafilea took place on 11 September 2003 at the family home (Gill, 2014, p. 187). Up until then she had denied having any knowledge of what had happened to her daughter. Now, Farzana’s defence counsel stated that, on the night in question, Iftikhar was very angry, “hitting [Shafilea], slapping her with his hands towards the facial area and punching her two to three times to the upper part of her body. [Farzana] tried to intervene but she was told to go away” (author’s personal notes, 2012). The defence counsel went on to explain that when Farzana tried, again, to help her daughter, she was “pushed away by both hands and also punched with a clenched fist” (Gill, 2014, p. 187). Contrary to Alesha’s account, Farzana claimed that only her third eldest daughter, then aged 12, was present. “Extremely scared” and fearing for her younger child’s safety, Farzana took her upstairs. Some twenty minutes later, she heard a car leave and came downstairs to find Shafilea and Iftikhar gone, along with her car. At 6:30am the next day, her husband returned without Shafilea (author’s personal notes, Gill, 2012).

However, there was even more damning evidence for Farzana’s complicity in Shafilea’s murder than Alesha’s testimony. This evidence came from a covert listening device that had been installed in the Ahmed home by the police in November 2003 after Alesha’s teachers had contacted them to report her story about Shafilea’s murder. On one recording, Farzana, in conversation with her other children, can be heard warning them not to say anything at school about what happened to Shafilea, telling her son, “If the slightest thing comes out of your mouth, we will be stuck in real trouble. Remember that”. In another exchange, Farzana scolded her children, saying, “Today is not a day to be beaten up, okay. Are you listening to
me? I'm talking to you”, demonstrating that abuse and violence were a normal part of family life in the Ahmed home.

Farzana’s treatment of Shafilea is illuminated by Kandiyoti’s seminal 1988 study of the phenomenon of abuse of daughters by their mothers in South Asian families; Kandiyoti saw this as a culturally specific form of “patriarchal bargain” between the mother and the extended household (Walker & Gill, 2019). Kandiyoti’s discussion of ‘classic patriarchy’ explains how family dynamics between younger and older women in South Asian familial systems are structured according to a patriarchal model that stresses “corporate male-headed entities rather than more autonomous mother and child units” (1988, p. 275): “Different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct ‘rules of the game’ and call for different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression”. In other words, men make the rules, but, if women play by them, they can gain a form of symbolic capital; specifically, they can present themselves as ‘conforming women’, enabling their survival under the patriarchal system. Where one woman’s misbehaviour is seen to dishonour the entire patriarchal familial unit, to ensure their survival and security, women, as much as men, monitor one another’s behaviour and enact punishment for transgressions. As such, Farzana’s behaviour can be partly understood as an attempt to preserve the honour of her family, to ensure that her other children avoided shame, and to protect herself against potential accusations from her husband of complicity in Shafilea’s behaviour.

Ultimately, the jury accepted Alesha’s version of events. On 3 August 2012, Shafilea’s parents were convicted of her murder: both received life sentences.

**Cultural predicaments**

In sentencing Shafilea’s parents, the judge, Mr Justice Roderick Evans, described Shafilea as a determined, able and ambitious girl “squeezed between two cultures, the culture and way of life that she saw around her and wanted to embrace and the culture and way of life her parents wanted to impose upon her” (Gill, 2014, p. 195). However, the causal factors behind Shafilea’s murder were far more complex than this or the British media’s tale of backward parents acting against modern Britain’s progressive social values. While the true facts of the case may never be known, all the accounts of what happened on 11 September 2003 circle back to the key role of honour, while demonstrating that a purely cultural explanation for Shafilea’s death is insufficient; her murder was a product of many factors, including the relationship between honour, gender and power inequalities within the Ahmed household.

The Ahmed family lived in a context that was both British and Pakistani, in what Homi Bhabha (1994) refers to as a “third space”. This notion applies to both generations of the Ahmed family, albeit in different ways. For instance, Iftikhar’s defence of his Englishness is particularly interesting in this context – it reveals how his own claims that he was sufficiently influenced by the UK’s cultural practices to consider himself English indicate that his actions were not simply caused by cultural conflict or adherence to notions of honour derived from his Pakistani upbringing (Brah, 1996). Indeed, Iftikhar had been married before to a Danish woman with whom he had a child (Keaveny, 2012) and led a “creolized-Western” lifestyle (Grillo, 2003). If Iftikhar considered himself English to the extent of taking great pains to insist on this as an important part of his identity, then it does not make sense that he murdered his daughter purely as a result of notions of ‘honour’ and ‘shame’; his pride in having a high degree of English values sits at odds with the notion that he would kill to demonstrate his ‘honour’ under Pakistani-derived values. While cognitive dissonance is a possible explanation for this contradiction, or
the idea that he might have felt torn between two different sets of cultural values, it is clear that his position in relation to notions of honour was not simple and straightforward. Moreover, given that he lived a different life with his first wife, the dynamics of his marriage to Farzana must have played at least some role in Shafilea’s murder. While culture and ‘honour’ were clearly key factors, they do not offer a sufficient explanation.

The fact that the various members of the Ahmed family did not occupy a single, shared, intersectionally configured space helps explain why the Ahmed children reacted to Shafilea’s murder in such different ways. Alesha’s brother spoke against her testimony, denying all of her claims about Shafilea’s murder. By contrast, Alesha initially behaved as if the murder had never happened, then told friends and teachers at school about it, and then recanted, only coming forwards again when she, herself, was accused of a crime involving her parents. As a child and domestic abuse victim who suffered trauma and coercion, Alesha had nowhere to go in the wake of Shafilea’s murder. She was still living at home and facing abuse in August 2010, when she finally told the police the full story of what she had seen on the night of 11 September 2003. Her situation was complicated by the fact that giving evidence against her parents had serious repercussions for her within Warrington’s tight-knit Pakistani community, which is why she had been too afraid to discuss Shafilea’s disappearance previously. Although her testimony proved crucial to securing her parents’ conviction, Alesha was too afraid to attend court again afterwards and was not present to hear the verdict.

Shafilea and Alesha’s social location was determined partly by being born in the 1980s in postcolonial Britain, and partly by the fact that their parents had immigrated from a rural area of Pakistan. The patriarchal system in which Shafilea and Alesha were ensnared did not derive simply from the Ahmeds’ ‘backward’ rural roots in opposition to enlightened British culture. Rather, they lived under the constraints imposed by both the patriarchal values to which all British women are subject, and the patriarchal values of their parents’ rural Pakistani upbringing. In struggling to make their own life choices, Alesha and Shafilea were continuously confronted with the contradictions between their internalised need to conform to their family’s values and, in doing so, avoid bringing shame upon themselves and their family, and their own desire to pursue greater personal freedom as British citizens living in the UK. While culture was a major factor, complex family dynamics, intersectional intergenerational differences and general issues of gender all played their part in Shafilea’s murder.

Critical findings

Culture is a major factor in ‘honour’-based violence, but it is not sufficient to explain the phenomenon. While individual and family dynamics also play a role, it is critical to understand HBV as part of the broader problem of violence against women and girls, which affects all communities and sectors of society. Only once the general issue of gendered violence is recognised can the specific forms that VAWG takes in different communities and cultures be properly understood and tackled through effective policy, practice and law. The following key findings exemplify these issues:

• In cultures and communities with a strong sense of family and community honour, rather than just notions of personal standing, the behaviour of one member can seriously affect all the others in terms of social status, access to resources and even inclusion in the community. Real or perceived ‘misbehaviour’ against social norms, values and traditions must be punished to alleviate ‘shame’, as this is the only way to restore the group’s standing.
Codes of behaviour concerned with honour and shame are rigid and highly gendered in that they are focused around control of female members’ sexual ‘purity’. This restricts the lives of women and girls in these communities in stringent ways.

When a family or community that holds such notions of shame and honour is based in the UK, there is often significant conflict between these family and/or community expectations and rules, and the rights that women and girls hold under British law. Intergenerational factors and family dynamics further complicate these conflicts.

South Asian women are socialised to believe that they are to blame for any violence they experience if it stems from real or perceived misbehaviour, as this shames and damages their entire family and only punishment can alleviate it. As a result, victims are reluctant to seek help or redress, especially from statutory agencies, and are often highly conflicted even when they do.

While acknowledging that cultural concepts of honour do play a powerful role in violence and domestic abuse against black and minority women, this is by no means the only factor at play in such cases. Ignoring how forms of violence specific to these communities relate to broader patterns of VAWG is vital in creating effective policy and laws while avoiding stigmatising communities and cultures in racialised ways.

**Implications for policy, practice and research**

The police refused to call Shafilea’s murder an ‘honour’ killing because they wanted to stress that no licence should be granted to those who claim that their cultural rights excuse acts of brutality. At the same time, however, those charged with protecting the public must be able to identify and understand the risk factors associated with all forms of VAWG in order to respond effectively. Achieving this goal will rely on the following:

- Debates about HBV and VAW must explore the intersection of culture with gender and other axes of differentiation; tackling violence against females in society is not just a question of culture, but also one of equity.
- More training for police officers based on case studies of successful and unsuccessful prosecutions, and the processes employed to successfully bring offenders to trial, is needed. In other words, training programmes must take account of what works and what does not work if the police are to be more effective in identifying, investigating and supporting the prosecution of HBV and other forms of VAWG.
- Knowledge about best practice must be disseminated and shared if governments, statutory agencies and NGOs are to develop effective policy, law and practical guidelines to tackle and prevent VAWG nationally and internationally.
- The need for a holistic intersectional approach both to achieve successful prosecutions and to better support victims needs to be recognised. This understanding must also be carried forward in better inter-agency cooperation and more effective engagement with specialist providers; only with the requisite knowledge can all victims receive equal treatment.
- Increasing the number of female officers from BME communities, and promoting their engagement in work to develop training, policy and practice, will help ensure that the police service has a wide range of lived experience within its own ranks to draw on.

Understanding the violence experienced by BME women in Britain requires a criminal justice approach that not only considers the links between all forms of gender-based
violence, but also addresses the specificity of particular forms of VAWG, such as HBV. A distinction must be drawn between condemning the culture of a specific social group and condemning a particular cultural practice, while recognising that culture is never a sufficient or complete explanation for an individual act of VAWG.

References


Bhadra, D. (2012). *Transcript of sections of audio from covert recordings with audio file and real timings*. (Case notes on file with author)


