



'Honor' Killing Spurs Outcry in Syria

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DAMASCUS, SYRIA -- Sixteen-year-old Zahra Ezzo died at the hospital last month after a brutal attack. But it was her brother who confessed to killing her -- and her family who appointed him to carry out the murder.

Some experts estimate that 200 to 300 honor killings like Zahra's occur every year in Syria. Most receive little or no attention. But Zahra's murder -- in part because it happened in the capital and not a rural area -- has compelled Syria's grand mufti, cleric Ahmad Hassoun, to publicly condemn the crime, calling for the first time for the immediate protection of girls at risk and for legal reform on the basis that such crimes are un-Islamic. President Bashar al-Assad has also promised to find a solution.

Among the public, too, debate is rising about the practice and the laws that protect men who carry out such killings.

A key question is whether the brother should go on trial for premeditated murder -- the family had planned it for months -- or as someone who had no choice because the clan's honor was at stake.

Syria's law is lenient on a man who kills or injures his female relative if he catches her in "illegitimate sexual acts with another," or in a "suspicious state with another." If Zahra's brother is tried under this law, he might get out of jail in three months.

"This is what we're trying to change," said Yumun Abu al-Hosn, a founding member of the Association for Women's Role Development, one of the few nongovernment organizations in Syria. The association runs the girls' shelter where Zahra took refuge in her final months.

"We may not be able to stop honor killings overnight, but at least if the crime is tried as premeditated murder, then Zahra and others like her will have some dignity in death."

Zahra's case is also compelling because of the events surrounding it.

According to Zahra before her death, say sources who spoke to her before she died, her father was having an extramarital affair. If the clan had discovered this, Zahra's father and his mistress might have both been killed. A friend of Zahra's father, a young man who took a liking to the then-15-year-old, threatened to tell all unless Zahra ran away with him.

She agreed. But when the clan discovered that Zahra had left, they decided to pursue both and kill them. But the police found them first. They put the man in jail, where he stands to serve a 15-year prison sentence for the kidnap and rape of a minor, and where he is safe from the clan's wrath. They put Zahra in the shelter.

But only for nine months. During that time, Zahra's family tried three times to regain custody of her, but the association refused, saying the family could not guarantee Zahra's safety.

The family then asked one of Zahra's cousins to marry her, which according to tradition would restore honor to the family. Fawaz hardly knew Zahra and was not in on the plot to kill her. He agreed to marry her first out of chivalry, then because he fell in love with her.

Her family and the family of her soon-to-be-husband all came to the shelter to formalize her marriage, and her father signed a sworn statement guaranteeing that neither he nor anyone in the family would harm Zahra.

So Zahra, whose name means flower, moved into her new husband's home, an apartment one floor below her new in-laws in Damascus.

But one month later, her brother came to visit. On the morning of his third day with them, when Zahra's husband went to work and Zahra slept in, Fayeze stabbed his sister to death.

Violence against women is coming under growing scrutiny in the Arab world. Last year, the United Nations Development Fund for Women sponsored for the first time a study on it in Syria, concluding that 1 in 4 women suffers physical abuse, usually from a male relative.

But honor killings, which happen in many Arab and Muslim countries as well as in Israel and Western Europe, are a touchy subject. Local religious and political leaders are usually reluctant to become involved in a clan's family affair, and authorities in many countries rarely

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report a crime as an honor killing, making gathering statistics very difficult.

Activists say that lawyers in countries with leniency laws for such killings often advise a male client accused of murder to claim it was in the name of honor to avoid the death penalty.

"There are hidden motives behind these murders. It could be for inheritance or for financial reasons or because the victim wanted to choose her husband -- or she's been raped or she's a victim of incest," said Rana Hussein, a Jordan-based activist who is writing a book on honor killing.

Reforms are often slow or unusually targeted. Morocco, for example, recently gave women the right to a light sentence if they killed in a fit of fury.

"They said this way we're making our laws 'equal.' But how many women kill men? No one needs a PhD to realize that the impact will be discriminatory," said Taina Bien-Aimé, executive director at Equality Now, a New York-based international human rights organization.

By Rasha Ellass
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