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DAUGHTERS OF HONOUR

*Navigating and Resisting Honour-Related
Violence in the Diaspora*

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Daughters of Honour: Navigating and Resisting Honour-Related Violence in the Diaspora

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Daughters of Honour

This paper engages with questions of honour-related violence on a global scale—acts of violence embedded in notions of honour that live under the larger umbrella of gender-based violence.

This conversation on honour-related violence emerges from the research I conducted for my Ph.D. dissertation, where I interviewed women who had transgressed boundaries of honour in their family and/or community, and as a result encountered honour related excommunication. In this paper, I will attempt to distill the findings from this research to have an important conversation with practitioners, who may see similar themes emerge from the diverse communities of children, youth, and families that they encounter in their practice.

My engagement with honour-related violence comes from the social location of being a second-generation Punjabi Sikh South Asian woman born and raised on the unceded Indigenous territory of the Cowichan tribes of Turtle Island, also known as British Columbia, Canada. As a settler/guest to this territory, I do not locate my Indigeneity to Turtle Island, but to where my father was born and where our family traditionally calls home. My family's native land is in Guluwa, Himachal Pradesh, in Northern India.

I speak from a subject location that marks my body as one of colour in a sea of whiteness that is Canada, while also recognizing that my body is racialized and defined as an immigrant in my everyday life. I also come

from a community that has an intimate understanding and relationship with honour.

Much of the work I will be speaking to in this paper emerges from an autoethnographic telling of my own life story, as well as life history interviews conducted with women who have survived moments of violence due to transgressing perceived boundaries of honour throughout their lives, resulting in their displacement from their family and/or community.

In this paper, I will begin by defining *honour* as it has been connected to violence in the Canadian context and the many ways in which honour-related violence has been attached to particular bodies and communities in Canada. In the second part, I will speak to the impact of this violence and the discourse on the second-generation South Asian woman who is defined by honour inside and outside her home. Finally, I will end with lessons, strategies, and considerations for child and youth care workers to think about when working with diverse women and girls who are encountering family and/or gender-based violence that may be framed by notions of honour.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

There are moments throughout our childhood, youth, and even young adulthood, when we may have transgressed boundaries set by our family and/or our community. These boundaries represent what authorities perceive as good or bad. Some call these family codes or community mores for how to behave in society. If you think back to these

times in your own youth, what were the consequences of transgressing such boundaries? How was your behaviour regulated? Were the consequences different for the men in the family as opposed to the women? What was your family and/or community trying to preserve and why? These questions become an important consideration when we are talking about honour-related violence, which in many contexts has become synonymous with particular communities, cultures, and bodies.

As you read the title of this article, perhaps when you try to locate the origins of my name as the author, you may naturally be drawing particular conclusions of how and where violence in the name of honour comes from and whose bodies are implicated. Like a moth drawn to a fire, we know these stereotypes are dangerous, yet we cannot always control the messages we have internalized. When I ask these questions, there may linger in your answers some indication that your body and your actions may also be regulated, punished, policed, and perhaps even persecuted in the name of preserving your family and/or community honour—or even to preserve a larger societal norm and ideology that maintains power in particular ideas. Could it be *your* body is preserving larger ideologies of honour dictated by patriarchy?

DEFINING THE “HONOUR” IN HONOUR-RELATED VIOLENCE

Honour itself is a word that has many meanings and speaks to many communities. When we look at the Oxford English

Dictionary from 1974 there is a telling definition that captures the basis for how perceived actions and behaviours of women affect her reputation.

Honour: High respect, esteem, deferential admiration; an expression of this; glory, credit, reputation, good name. b. The chastity or purity of a woman; a woman's reputation for this (p. 1264).

The purity of a woman is defined as being honourable or not, and the reputation of a woman is situated in her chastity or sexual behaviour. It is important to recall the work of Yuval-Davis and Anthias, who unpack how the role(s) of women in society become a symbolic representation of a nation's ethnic and racial identity, as they describe in the following quote:

Women are controlled not only by being encouraged or discouraged from having children who will become members of the various ethnic groups within the state. They are also controlled in terms of the 'proper' way in which they should have them – i.e. in ways which they will reproduce the boundaries of the symbolic identity of their group or that of their husbands. (p. 9)

To define a woman's honour as being situated in her body and in relation to those she is sexually active with, is to police, punish, and persecute women for the purposes of maintaining control of how a society is imagined and maintained. Women's bodies

are constantly regulated through violence and force by a nation's subconscious greed for building a fixed, racialized, and ethnic society. This ideology is repetitively maintained in subtle and overt ways through various institutions and is practiced both in the public sphere and in the everyday actions of individuals in the private sphere of home and family.

These arguments are not new and we see them taking the form most overtly in times of war and strife. Patriarchy is invested in maintaining an ideal image of women and the particular performance expected from a

Women's bodies are constantly regulated through violence and force by a nation's subconscious greed for building a fixed, racialized, and ethnic society.

woman's body, both of which can never truly be achieved or attained. So what happens when you challenge these ideas or notions of chastity and purity?

The word for the honour in the Punjabi community is *izzat* and does not go that far from the English definition of honour. When we speak about honour or *izzat*, we are speaking to a sense of duty or responsibility everyone has to their relations first. Consider how the actions of one will impact those they are connected to, the nature of this connection, and the potential reputation of the family in the wider community. Many times this is simplified in dominant discourses

when someone engages in an honour killing to save face or their reputation in the community and society. A family's reputation becomes an important factor in the current workings of *izzat* or honour and can be summed up quite effectively in the phrase *lokh kya kyan ghe?* What will people say?

In a world that functions based on ideologies of patriarchy, heteronormativity (the power and normalcy given to heterosexism, see bell hooks), and capitalism, honour and what is considered transgressing boundaries of honour are defined in distinctively different ways for women as opposed to men. The daughters of a household hold the responsibility of having honour live in their bodies. Any actions they choose to take or are taken upon their bodies by others (in particular, sexual acts) become a reflection of their own honour codes as well as a reflection of the family and of wider society.

Patriarchy is evident when we think about larger notions of beauty, the marketing strategies surrounding women's bodies, and the high prevalence of sexualized violence enacted on the bodies of women (1 in 3 women will encounter sexualized violence at some point in their lives). Heteropatriarchy (the power and normalcy placed on the nuclear heterosexist private family and gender roles) is a global phenomenon and these ideologies work to regulate women's bodies.

Understanding women's bodies as sites of violence because of honour is not a new concept or one that is specific to South Asian communities and cultures. It is a concept

that is very much rooted in patriarchy, societies and communities that are invested in creating a norm or ideal, all of which contribute to control, power, and the regulation of the masses for colonial and capitalist means. Gender-based violence and honour-related violence are one of the many tools that fill the cupboards of patriarchy which can be used to condone or justify violence in order to maintain control over women who transgress norms/boundaries set around their bodies.

It may seem that we have strayed from the path of talking about honour-related violence; however, we must consider the wider umbrella under which honour-related violence sits in order to consider how we are impacted by it and how to help young women and girls who are held within the confines of honour and the violence that is associated with it.

HONOUR-RELATED VIOLENCE IN CANADA

In Canada, there have been particular stories that have come to be defined as honour killings—Jassi Sidhu, Amandeep Atwal, Aqsa Parvez, and the Shafia sisters. Each of these women chose to engage in sexual relationships with men that were deemed dishonourable by their family and/or their community. As a result, each woman was murdered by family members after encountering acts of violence throughout their short lives because their perceived behaviours were deemed to have transgressed the boundaries of honour in their family and community.

These stories of women's lives cut short were horrific to hear. As someone who has also struggled with the boundaries of honour placed on my body throughout my life, I was left with anger and pain. I was also angry and overwhelmed by the racist discourses in the dominant mainstream society that circulated after each of their deaths hit the media. As brown bodies that were defined by their family's religions, these girls bodies were pathologized (viewed as abnormal or unhealthy) as helpless victims of a deviant patriarchy and juxtaposed against a picture of white neo-liberal western ideals of feminism and choice.

of honour crimes for western audiences; (3) purify liberalism in order to distract the gaze from the west to establish superiority of liberalism; (4) frame honour in human rights arguments in order to give legitimacy to these regulations; and finally (5) situate the cultures that follow honour as ahistorical and ignore the transformation of women, families, and everyday social and cultural life and experience.

These very seductive and culturally racist discourses push the voices of survivors and victims down and encourage communities to either turn on each other or to live in the shame and guilt. The ultimate mission from a policy perspective is to encourage assimilation of immigrant bodies and to create a picture of us (white liberal Canada) versus them (brown, religious, cultural immigrants) which serves to uplift white supremacy and the power that is situated in the hands of colonial settlers in order to justify continued war and power over the East (See Edward Said, 1978).

Honour and what is considered transgressing boundaries of honour are defined in distinctively different ways for women as opposed to men.

The South Asian community found themselves silenced after each of these murders. And instead of speaking out and to our own community to address honour-related violence, we found ourselves defending our religions, cultures, and our brown men who were seen as barbaric terrorists practicing religious and cultural ideas not welcome in Canada.

Lila Abu-Lughod (2011) speaks effectively to how such examples emerging from the west perpetuate discourses that: (1) display brown women without moral agency and autonomy; (2) create a fantasy and seduction

These larger agendas may be difficult to imagine in a country that is often defined by its humanitarian role in the world and its respect for human rights. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that the United Nations has defined Canada's Indigenous communities as living under poor conditions, and has defined policies and practices historically (and currently) that discriminate against Indigenous and racialized bodies. These

policies include the enslavement of people of African descent, legislation targeting Chinese and South Asian communities of colour, and the long history of targeted genocide of Indigenous people.

THE DAUGHTERS OF HONOUR

In an effort to speak back to this history of racist policies in Canada, while also holding the South Asian community accountable for addressing violence from within our community, I chose to interview women who encountered honour violence in their lives, particularly in relation to their choice to be sexually intimate with men and women who were considered unacceptable. As a result, these women were displaced from their family and/or community.

Each of these women is second generation—meaning they immigrated came to Canada as an immigrant at a very young age or were the first generation born in the South Asian diaspora¹. Their particular experiences and stories are unique, as this generation straddles different encounters with racism and oppression than their parents (Rajiva, 2006). Their belonging is questioned not only by white settler Canada as a whole but also by the Indigenous lands to which they are expected to be loyal in South Asia.

Furthermore, much of this generation is defined as encountering a culture clash when they rebel and transgress boundaries in their home. These very boundaries are defined in the West as rights and as a result, these girls are seen by their white counterparts as succeeding in their desire to become more western. A strong binary is thus created in which a second-generation girl has to choose between her culture and being western.

These women spoke of encountering patriarchy inside their family and community. They also encountered patriarchy, sexism, racism, and oppression in the public realm of a western society that otherwise defines itself as egalitarian.

Each of the women described the honour-related policing, punishing, and taming of their bodies and behaviours throughout their lives a continuum of violence, rather than as exclusively direct physical violence.

Thinking back to the questions I asked at the beginning of this article and the transgressions that you may have been afraid to take, what do you think were some of the boundaries that you did not cross? What was the story that led to this family code? What were the consequences of crossing those boundaries?

1. By using the word Diaspora, I am following the work of Avtar Brah (1996), who defines it as *dispersion from the centre of a home*. South Asians have been dispersed to various parts of the world for economic and political reasons—including indentured slavery as a result of colonialism. Although the concept of Diaspora is highly debated in its application to communities other than the Jewish community, I have chosen to use it to represent a scattering of a group of people and of their reconnection. I believe this helps to reflect the layered history of colonization, migration, and displacement.

For the women I interviewed, there were ongoing negotiations about what boundaries they were willing to cross and what aspects of their lives they were willing to share with their family and/or community in order to avoid potential consequences. For example, the women talked about carefully maneuvering through life and creating multiple worlds in order to navigate the boundaries of honour, patriarchy, and racism inside and outside the home. This involved withholding information about these multiple different worlds and keeping those secrets separate from their family.

When some of those walls set around the worlds crumbled, and they came out of the closet with their secrets, these behaviours were perceived as transgressions going against the family honour. It is in these moments that the family is expected to enact power over their women in order to address these transgressions. This expectation comes from the community as much as it does from inside the family. Many times, it is the expectation that the women in the family deal with the transgression first and enforce the family codes; the men become involved only when there is a need to step up the interventions.

As a result, the women I interviewed found themselves facing what they call an impossible choice, whether to choose to remain in the family and follow the honour codes or be excommunicated by the family, essentially leading to their removal from the family and community completely. These complicated notions of *choice* that the women had to make, were interpreted by wider society as them *choosing* to be Western in spite of the

fact that the women themselves did not feel they were being embraced by the open arms of liberal feminism. (In fact, it was only within their family that they had the safety of being part of a space that understood the racism and sexism that they navigated in the public realm.)

Ultimately, all the women I spoke to were excommunicated and spoke to their encounters of honour-related violence as a process of grief and loss, similar to a death—one, where they were symbolically killed in the name of honour in the eyes of their family and community.

Living in this realm of displacement affected not only the women's relationships with their family and community but also their physical and mental health. In an effort to move forward from this loss, many of the women built new attachments that allowed them to create chosen families in their lives. The possibility of reunifying with their family and/or community was always a hope, but not always a possibility, leaving the women with a conflicted understanding of themselves in relation to their family and their community.

Almost all of the women affirmed—and wanted the world to know—that they can love their family, community, culture and religion, despite the violence that might or had been enacted by those who would otherwise be sources of connection. This serves to challenge some of the dominant ways we understand violence in connection to relationships and love.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

When we think about the work we do as human service professionals, child and youth care workers, social workers, or even community-based activists, we want to do so from a place of empathy and care. However, many times we encounter people when they are at the worst possible place they have ever been in their lives. It is important when we hear stories of survival, resilience, and resistance—like the ones that my sisters shared with me in this research project—that we think about what it means for our work and how we can shift our practice so that we are accountable to the people we are working with.

We must allow young women and girls to define with us what safety looks like and feels like for them.

They understand their family, their community, and the worlds they navigate better than we ever can.

I walked away from this research with four lessons that can be applied when working with women and girls encountering honour-related and gender-based violence.

The first lesson is that we must examine the everyday workings of violence, shame, guilt, and honour, rather than the exceptions. It is on this continuum of violence that we can engage young women and girls before they encounter violence on the extreme end of the continuum and put in place interventions that have lasting change.

The second lesson is that we must think about applying a family violence lens to our work with young women and girls. The family is a large part of the system that women and girls are navigating, and even if they are sources of love and support, they can also be sources of pain and violence. In many helping discourses, love and violence are situated as binaries that cannot be held together. Yet the women I interviewed reminded me of the oppressive impact of forcing women to see their families as only violent oppressors and not as the caring support system they are or have been.

The third lesson is that we need to examine the institutions that reinforce gender-based

violence as well as the regulation and surveillance of the bodies of young women and girls, and we need to hold those accountable for this violence. These include government policies, criminal codes that target culture, women's

perceived behaviours as the sources of violence, and our education system. These (and others) need to be examined for how they could be fostering and reinforcing patriarchy, capitalism, and violence.

The fourth lesson is that we are many times the first social support systems that women and girls encounter in the world that give them a space to share their stories of violence. We must remember to give them space and opportunities for them to provide feedback throughout our work together.

This serves to make the relationship transformative—more about reciprocity than the victim-and-helper binary.

We must remember to treat the words of young women and girls as important; we must listen to the urgency and seriousness in their voice. Many of the women that were killed by their family members spoke to a worker about the fear that they may be murdered by their family, yet each time their words were disregarded as overly dramatic and workers found themselves in a place of not knowing what to do, so did nothing.

We need to remember to act with patience when someone is disclosing violence for the first time—let them go at their own pace, not our pace. We must allow young women and girls to define with us what safety looks like and feels like for them. They understand their family, their community and the worlds they navigate better than we ever can, and they have been navigating these worlds up until the point of disclosure, so we must embrace and respect that journey and strengthen it with the support we can offer, instead of building something new that does not speak to their reality.

We must see the young women and girls we encounter through the systems that they will potentially navigate as they move forward. If they must make a report to the police, we must accommodate that necessity in this process. The continuity we provide and the actions we take to help them move forward in their journey toward healing can make such an incredible difference in a young woman's life and completely alter their

perspective on what support and care can look like.

Finally, we need to recognize that moving out of violence in one's life is a long process and these women and girls need long-term support. If we can play that role in a young person's life, we must make a commitment to do so. If we cannot, we need to find ways to encourage and foster long-term supports elsewhere in their lives after we leave.

We have a wonderful privilege and honour to be a part of the lives of so many children, youth and families. And our work as professionals is even more important as a result of the increasing movement of people across the globe. With this change will come new and different acts of violence and experiences of trauma and pain. As we move forward in our work, let us recognize our role in addressing gender-based violence and engaging communities across difference.

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