

# Honour Killings in Pakistan: A Cultural Crime Mislabeled as Religious Practice

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## Abstract

Honour killings in Pakistan represent a deeply rooted cultural pathology masquerading as religiously sanctioned justice. Each year, hundreds of women—and occasionally men—are murdered by family members under the pretext of preserving familial "honour," particularly in cases involving alleged moral transgressions. While proponents often appeal to Islamic principles or tribal customs to legitimize these acts, such justifications reflect a gross misinterpretation of both Islamic law (*Shari'ah*) and the moral ethos of the Qur'an and Sunnah. This article offers a comprehensive postdoctoral-level critique of honour killings, exploring them not as isolated criminal incidents but as systemic violations of human rights and divine justice. The study deconstructs the false theological and jurisprudential claims used to validate honour-based violence, drawing upon classical Islamic legal sources, contemporary fatwas, and the prophetic model of mercy, restraint, and due process. It further situates honour killings within broader sociological frameworks—examining the intersections of tribal patriarchy, state legal lacunae, and social stigma that perpetuate silence and impunity. Through critical analysis of legal statutes, court cases, and cultural narratives, the article underscores the urgency of reclaiming Islamic ethics as a means of dismantling the cultural scaffolding that enables honour crimes. Finally, the study proposes a multi-sectoral reform strategy encompassing legal reform, religious reeducation, survivor protection, and theological advocacy. Rooted in the Islamic principles of *'adl* (justice), *karāmah* (dignity), and *hifz al-nafs* (preservation of life), the article calls for a unified religious and legal stance to abolish this morally and theologically indefensible practice.

**Keywords:** Honour killings, Islamic law, Gender-Based Violence, Cultural Misinterpretation, Human dignity

## Introduction

Honour killings—commonly referred to in Pakistan as *karo-kari*, *siyah kari*, or *ghairat ke naam par qatl*—constitute one of the most persistent and brutal manifestations of gender-based violence in South Asia. These extrajudicial murders are typically carried out by family members, most often against women, who are perceived to have violated traditional codes of family honour or sexual propriety. The alleged transgressions that precipitate such killings include marrying by personal choice, engaging in relationships outside arranged marital structures, refusing to submit to familial control, or being the subject of unverified

accusations of sexual impropriety.

Despite being condemned under both international human rights law and the Pakistani Penal Code, honour killings continue to receive implicit cultural sanction and, in many cases, legal leniency through the misuse of *qisās* and *diyāt* provisions.<sup>1</sup>

These acts are not merely crimes of passion or isolated episodes of violence—they are expressions of deeply entrenched patriarchal control, tribal customs, and moral policing, often justified through distorted invocations of Islamic values.

This article aims to interrogate and ultimately dismantle the claim that honour killings have any legitimate basis in Islam. Drawing upon Qur’anic ethics, the Prophetic tradition (*Sunnah*), and classical jurisprudence across the major Islamic legal schools, the study argues unequivocally that honour-based killings are not only extra-legal but constitute *zulm* (oppression)—an egregious sin explicitly condemned by Islamic teachings.

The central thesis of this research is that honour killings are cultural crimes, not religious mandates. Their persistence results from the conflation of pre-Islamic tribal norms with Islamic law, and their eradication requires both legal reform and theological deconstruction.<sup>2</sup> By re-centering Islamic discourse on the sanctity of life (*ḥifẓ al-naḥs*), dignity (*karāmah*), and justice (*‘adl*), this article seeks to contribute to an emerging Islamic human rights framework that categorically delegitimizes honour-based violence.

### **The Cultural Logic of Honour in Pakistan**

Honour killings in Pakistan cannot be fully understood without examining the sociocultural architecture that sustains them. Despite claims of religious legitimacy, the roots of this practice lie in tribal codes, patriarchal control, and socio-economic power hierarchies that predate Islam. These cultural scripts continue to exert influence, particularly in rural and semi-urban contexts, where state law is weak, religious discourse is manipulated, and traditional authority remains unchallenged.

### **Tribal Codes and Patriarchal Honour**

In various regions of Pakistan—including rural Sindh, Balochistan, southern Punjab, and the tribal belt of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—the notion of *ghairat* (honour) functions as a collective moral currency.<sup>3</sup>

It is predominantly male-defined and is intimately tied to the conduct, chastity, and obedience of women within the family. This paradigm casts women not as autonomous moral agents but as repositories of male honour, whose perceived transgressions can bring collective shame (*‘ār*) upon the family or tribe.

Under such a framework, even unproven allegations of impropriety—such as speaking to a man, refusing an arranged marriage, or choosing one’s spouse—can lead to lethal retribution.<sup>4</sup>

Male relatives often assume the role of *ḥārisūn al-sharaf* (guardians of honour), interpreting murder as a justifiable and redemptive act. These killings are not only normalized but are often valorized as acts of bravery and fidelity to tradition.

Such a worldview is inherently incompatible with Islamic ethics, which prioritize *‘adl* (justice), *ḥusn al-ẓann* (positive assumptions), and due process over mob justice or vengeance.

### Intersection with Feudalism and Illiteracy

The persistence of honour killings is further reinforced by the intersection of feudal power structures and widespread illiteracy, particularly in rural Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> Landowning elites (*waderas, khans, maliks*) often act as custodians of both cultural and quasi-judicial authority, presiding over informal adjudication systems such as *panchayats* and *jirgas*. These bodies, though extra-constitutional, continue to wield considerable influence, frequently delivering verdicts that are **inconsistent with both Islamic law and the Pakistani Penal Code**.

In many cases, honour killings are condoned—or even ordered—by such forums, which prioritize communal cohesion and male dominance over legal accountability or ethical considerations.<sup>6</sup>

The absence of legal literacy among the masses means that Islamic teachings on due process, presumption of innocence, and the sanctity of life are rarely invoked, let alone defended.

Moreover, weak law enforcement, political patronage, and the misuse of *qisās* and *diyāt* laws create a climate of impunity. Perpetrators often escape punishment through familial forgiveness mechanisms, further emboldening cycles of violence and silencing dissent.

This cultural, judicial, and theological dissonance necessitates urgent reform and re-education. As the next section will show, honour killings are not merely culturally harmful—they are theologically indefensible.

### Islamic Jurisprudence on Honour and Killing

Contrary to widespread misconceptions and the cultural misuse of religion, Islamic law offers no justification whatsoever for extrajudicial punishment in the name of honour.<sup>7</sup>

Honour killings not only violate the sanctity of life, but also disregard the comprehensive procedural justice that the *Shari‘ah* demands. Classical jurisprudence (*fiqh*) from all major Sunni and Shia schools underscores that vigilante actions—particularly in matters related to *zinā* (fornication) or morality—are theologically illegitimate **and** legally criminal.

### The Sanctity of Life in Islam

The preservation of life (*hifẓ al-nafs*) is among the five foundational objectives (*maqāṣid*) of Islamic law. The Qur’an proclaims:

*“Whoever kills a soul—unless for a soul or for corruption done in the land—it is as if he had slain all mankind. And whoever saves one, it is as if he had saved all mankind.”<sup>8</sup>*

This verse unequivocally affirms the **inviolability of human life**. Extrajudicial killing, regardless of motivation, is considered *ḥarām* (forbidden) and categorically condemned. No cultural notion of *ghairat* (honour) or social shame can override this divine principle.

In the Prophetic tradition, even in situations of serious moral transgression, the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ insisted on due process, counsel, and legal restraint—not retaliatory violence. This ethic of procedural justice stands in stark contrast to the impulsive, male-dominated violence of honour killings.

### Zinā and Islamic Legal Procedure

While Islam does classify *zinā* (unlawful sexual intercourse) as a punishable offense, it simultaneously imposes extremely stringent evidentiary standards to prevent abuse and false accusations. The Qur’an stipulates:

*"And those who launch a charge against chaste women and do not bring four witnesses—lash them with eighty stripes and reject their testimony forever..."<sup>9</sup>*

In Islamic law, a person can be punished for *zinā* only if:

1. Four adult male Muslim eyewitnesses testify to having seen the act of actual intercourse, not merely suspicious behavior;
2. Or the accused confesses willingly, multiple times, and without coercion, before a qualified Islamic court (*hākim sharʿī*).

Private individuals are prohibited from carrying out any punishment. Vigilante actions, such as honour killings based on suspicion or gossip, are not only unlawful but constitute major violations of both divine law and public order (*ḥirābah*).

### **False Accusation and the Sin of Qadhf**

The Qurʾan harshly condemns those who accuse others of immoral conduct without proof:

*"Indeed, those who accuse chaste women and do not bring four witnesses—lash them with eighty stripes and never accept their testimony, for they are the defiantly disobedient."<sup>10</sup>*

This ruling on qadhf (false accusation) affirms that even a verbal allegation without evidence is itself punishable. When families execute women based on mere suspicion, rumor, or surveillance of private conduct, they are not only acting outside Islamic law—they are committing an act of legal and moral injustice.

Such killings are therefore not expressions of religious piety but rather acts of *zulm* (oppression), which the Prophet ﷺ warned against repeatedly:

*"Beware of oppression, for oppression will be darkness on the Day of Resurrection."<sup>11</sup>*

In sum, honour killings lack any jurisprudential legitimacy in Islam. They violate the objectives of the *Sharīʿah*, undermine justice, and desecrate the sanctity of life—all under a false cloak of religiosity.

### **Honour Killings and Pakistani Law**

Despite national and international condemnation, honour killings persist in Pakistan, in part due to systemic legal failures, cultural impunity, and misapplications of Islamic penal principles.<sup>12</sup>

While legal reforms have been introduced to address these crimes, enforcement remains sporadic and inconsistent, particularly in rural and tribal regions where parallel justice systems and patriarchal norms often supersede formal law.

### **Legal Framework**

Under the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), Section 302 classifies honour killings as premeditated murder, punishable by death or life imprisonment. In theory, honour-based violence carries the same legal gravity as any other form of homicide. To address the glaring issue of family-based pardons that allowed murderers to escape justice, two key legislative interventions were introduced:

#### **1. Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2004:**

Attempted to reclassify honour killings as non-compoundable, preventing perpetrators from being fully pardoned by heirs.

2. **Criminal Law (Amendment) (Offences in the Name or Pretext of Honour) Act, 2016:** Strengthened the law by mandating life imprisonment for honour killings, even if the family of the victim forgave the killer. It aimed to limit the abuse of *qisās* (retribution) and *diyāt* (blood money) provisions in such cases.

While these reforms mark legislative progress, implementation has remained weak, especially in areas where traditional justice mechanisms—*jirgas*, *panchayats*—and feudal influence dominate.

### **Persistent Legal Loopholes**

Despite statutory reforms, numerous legal and procedural gaps continue to allow perpetrators of honour killings to evade meaningful accountability:

#### **Pardons by family members:**

Since the perpetrators are often immediate relatives, they are also the legal heirs of the victim. They may forgive themselves under *qisās* and *diyāt* laws, which, while rooted in Islamic jurisprudence, are misused to legitimize impunity in honour cases.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Lack of witness testimony:**

Honour killings are frequently committed in private or rural settings, making eyewitness accounts rare. Fear of retribution, social ostracization, or tribal reprisals further discourages testimony, weakening prosecutorial cases.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Police collusion and investigative apathy:**

Law enforcement agencies often reflect the same patriarchal values that underlie honour-based violence. Police may deliberately delay investigations, tamper with evidence, or pressurize victims' families into reconciliation.<sup>15</sup>

#### **Cultural and societal pressures:**

Families of victims are often coerced into silence or complicity. Social stigma, threats to personal safety, and pressure from community elders prevent survivors or relatives from pursuing legal action.<sup>16</sup>

The result is a dual legal reality: one where honour killings are criminalized on paper, but normalized and under-prosecuted in practice. This dichotomy between statutory law and cultural application necessitates a comprehensive rethinking—not only of the legal architecture but also of religious and social narratives that silently enable such violence.

### **Theological Rebuttal of Honour Killing Narratives**

One of the most dangerous justifications for honour killings in Pakistan is the misappropriation of Islamic texts and concepts to validate acts of private vengeance.<sup>17</sup>

In reality, both the Qur'ān and Sunnah unequivocally reject vigilantism, extrajudicial punishment, and gender-based violence. A clear and authoritative theological rebuttal is essential to disarm those who falsely cloak cultural violence in religious legitimacy.

#### **Basis in Qur'ān or Sunnah**

Nowhere in the Qur'ān or authentic Prophetic traditions (*Sunnah*) is there any permission to kill a person—especially a family member—based on perceived dishonour.<sup>18</sup>

The Qur'ān establishes strict limitations on the taking of life, which must only occur under legal authority and due process, not personal initiative:

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*"It is not permissible to shed the blood of a Muslim who testifies that none has the right to be worshipped but Allah, except in three cases: a married person who commits adultery, a life for a life, and the one who abandons his religion and separates from the community."*<sup>19</sup>

This narration underscores that only a qualified Islamic court, under stringent evidentiary rules, may sanction capital punishment. Honour killings, carried out without trial or investigation, are explicitly un-Islamic, violating not only legal norms but also divine ethical standards of justice (*'adl*) and mercy (*rahmah*).

### **Societal Impacts of Honour Killings**

The consequences of honour killings in Pakistan extend far beyond the immediate loss of life. These acts of violence have a cumulative, corrosive effect on gender relations, family structures, community cohesion, and the public perception of religion.<sup>20</sup>

They perpetuate systemic oppression while distorting the ethical core of Islamic teachings. This section outlines three major spheres of impact—gender, society, and religion—that reveal honour killings to be not only individual crimes, but collective moral failures with long-term societal costs.

#### **Gender Oppression and Fear**

Honour killings serve as a brutal tool of patriarchal control, targeting primarily women and girls who attempt to exercise basic human rights—such as pursuing education, choosing a spouse, or asserting autonomy over their bodies. The persistent threat of violence creates a climate of fear, where female agency is systemically suppressed and conformity is enforced through the specter of death.

Such fear extends across generations. Daughters grow up witnessing the consequences of disobedience; mothers internalize silence; sisters police one another.<sup>21</sup>

The result is a self-perpetuating system of gender inequality, sustained by cultural expectations and the absence of legal or moral accountability. Honour killings are thus not only acts of violence—they are mechanisms of social conditioning that encode submission and subjugation into the daily lives of women.

### **Social Breakdown and Distrust**

The normalization of honour killings fractures the moral fabric of families and communities. Instead of being spaces of trust and support, households become arenas of surveillance and suspicion.<sup>22</sup>

Male guardianship mutates into authoritarian control, while familial love becomes conditional, hinging on the performance of culturally constructed gender norms.<sup>23</sup>

This dynamic produces moral hypocrisy: male transgressions—such as extramarital affairs, sexual violence, or abandonment—are often excused or hidden, while women are punished even for unfounded accusations. Honour killings thus institutionalize a double standard that erodes trust, fuels resentment, and prevents honest dialogue within families.

At the communal level, honour-based violence delegitimizes the role of state law and rational dispute resolution. It fosters vigilantism, erases women's voices from public life, and creates a culture of impunity that undermines the rule of law itself.

### Religious Distortion and Ethical Erosion

Perhaps most tragically, honour killings warp the public perception of Islam by associating its sacred values with tribal brutality.<sup>24</sup>

When perpetrators invoke Islamic terminology—*ghairat*, *sharaf*, *hijāb*, *ta'zīr*—to justify murder, they co-opt the moral language of faith for violent ends. This blurring of lines between religion and culture feeds both internal disillusionment and external criticism.

For many Muslim youth, particularly women, the gap between the compassionate, justice-oriented Islam of the Qur'an and the oppressive practices in their homes becomes irreconcilable. Simultaneously, critics of Islam—especially in Western media and secular human rights circles—use honour killings as evidence of Islam's supposed incompatibility with modernity and human rights.

Thus, these killings not only destroy individual lives, but also undermine the ethical authority of Islamic law, giving rise to Islamophobic narratives and fueling global suspicion toward Muslim societies.

### Preventive Strategies and Islamic Reforms

Addressing honour killings requires a multi-dimensional strategy that integrates Islamic ethics, legislative enforcement, education, and grassroots mobilization. Reform efforts must not only dismantle the legal loopholes and cultural norms that enable such violence but also reclaim Islam from misused interpretations. This section outlines practical and theological interventions.

### Role of Religious Scholars ('Ulamā')

Religious scholars possess unique authority in shaping moral consciousness and legal discourse. Their leadership is critical in:

1. Issuing categorical fatwas declaring honour killings as *ḥarām*, not only unlawful but morally reprehensible.
2. Publicly disentangling Islamic morality from tribal honour codes, emphasizing that Islam protects life, not reputation.
3. Promoting Prophetic ethics of compassion, procedural justice, and restraint, particularly in gender-related matters.
4. Leading Friday sermons (*khuṭabā'*) that challenge toxic masculinity and glorification of violence.

### Legal Reforms

Despite existing laws, systemic reform is needed to close judicial loopholes and ensure meaningful prosecution:

1. Amend or repeal qisas and diyat provisions in cases of honour killing where the perpetrator and victim belong to the same family.
2. Establish fast-track gender violence courts with trained judges to expedite justice.
3. Mandate protection for witnesses and survivors, including confidentiality and relocation options.
4. Enforce compulsory post-mortem exams and FIR registration in all suspected honour killings to avoid police cover-ups.

## Conclusion

Honour killings are not expressions of religious devotion, but cultural crimes falsely sanctified through selective readings of tradition. They undermine the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, distort the teachings of the Qurʾan, and profane the legacy of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. By conflating *ghairat* with piety and murder with moral rectitude, these acts represent a spiritual, ethical, and legal crisis. The path forward lies in reclaiming Islamic ethics from patriarchy, reforming civil law in line with authentic Sharīʿah, and mobilizing society through education and compassion. Islam upholds dignity, due process, and the sanctity of life—not vigilantism or vengeance. To restore honour in society, we must protect, not punish; educate, not execute; and above all, we must return to the ethical spirit of Islam, which commands us to uphold *truth, justice, and mercy* above all else.

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