

Phyllis Chesler Holds Middle East Forum Webinar on Honor Killings

Phyllis Chesler, a Shillman-Ginsburg Fellow at the Middle East Forum, emerita professor of psychology and women's studies, and the author of eighteen books, spoke to participants in a May 18 Middle East Forum webinar (video below) about the barbaric practice of honor killing and how to combat it.

Honor killing is the "cold blooded murder of girls and women by their families of origin." In a "shame and honor tribal culture, ... a girl's virginity and reproductive capacity, her fertility, are owned by her family, literally. Not by the girl herself. She represents *their* honor," Chesler explained. "If a girl is seen as damaged goods, her family will then be responsible ... no one will marry their other children or deal with them economically. They'll be shunned." The only way the family can "cleanses themselves of this shame [is] with blood – *her* blood."

The list of offenses that can trigger an honor killing is long, including engaging in sex outside of marriage, refusing an arranged marriage, marrying outside of one's religious sect or cast, having infidel friends, and becoming too Westernized. Since the aim is to recapture family honor, not punishment, it matters little whether the accusations are true. In rare cases where honor killers are prosecuted, according to Chesler, "they claim that they're only acting in self-defense, that communal norms drove them to it."

Unlike domestic violence against women in Western countries, where the perpetrators are almost exclusively men, usually acting alone and spontaneously, "honor killings are carefully planned conspiracies." Typically there is a "designated hands-

on killer" acting in collaboration with other relatives, including "mothers, sisters, and aunts." The involvement of female relatives is common, according to Chesler, as women have internalized the same patriarchal and tribal beliefs that men have and, in addition, they're responsible for keeping their daughters in line. They will pay a heavy price if their daughters dishonor the family. So very often ... mothers will lure their daughters home saying, 'It's okay, he'll forgive you, we'll work it out.' And then she dies.

Honor killing is "not based in any particular religion," said Chesler, noting that in India, the country where honor killing is by far the most prevalent, it is practiced by both Muslims and Hindus. However, Chesler's research has shown that Hindus "only do this in India ... Those who immigrate to the West don't do this." Honor killings in Europe and the United States are "mainly a Muslim-on-Muslim phenomenon."

Chesler has been active in the fight against honor killings, frequently submitting affidavits to help girls and women in flight from being honor killed seek political asylum in the United States. Protecting victims within immigrant communities involves "removing girls at risk from homes permanently, sheltering them appropriately, entering them into federal witness protection programs because their families will never stop pursuing them, [and] finding them adoptive families and communal networks without which they cannot thrive."

Eradicating honor-based violence "require[s] mass education, consistent law enforcement and the vigorous assistance of the clergy," said Chesler. This means prosecuting not just the direct perpetrators, who expect and accept that they risk punishment, but also the wider circle of relatives who indirectly facilitate it. "I think after you arrest the entire family that conspired, collaborated, instigated and perpetrated an honor killing, after they've done their time in jail, I think that the lesson should be the entire family will be deported ... the hands-on perpetrators together with those

who idly stood by.”

At the same time, there needs to be “massive outreach educationally” to Muslim immigrants that “spell[s] out, not [just] the punishment but the advantages” of forswearing the threat of honor-based violence against their daughters:

Girls could get an education. They can add to the family income. They can live not just on the public dole, but productively and they can still honor their families. They can still honor their religions ... If we could get imams and mullahs to help with this, that would be terrific.

Unfortunately, the Western media is reluctant to address the problem due to the misguided belief that singling out the culture-specific practices of immigrants is racist. “Honor-based violence ... must not be justified in the name of cultural relativism, tolerance, anti-racism, diversity or political correctness.”