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Honour, Violence, Women and Islam

Mohammad Mazher Idriss and Tahir Abbas (eds.); Abingdon; Routledge; 2010; 248 pages; £75, ISBN 10:0-414-56542-1; ISBN 13:978-0-415-56542-4

Honour, violence, women and Islam – what other ingredients does one need to create a truly combustible concoction, impregnating the mind with scandalous images so well known from popular media? Indeed, hardly a week can pass without sensational reports on yet another incidence where these four elements have played a prominent role. In a world where myths are intertwined with truths, and objectivity gives way to subjective and elaborate narratives that are meant not to analyse but to shock, *Honour, Violence, Women and Islam*, a scholarly attempt to address questions of honour-related violence, is a truly exceptional publication.

The editors, Idriss and Abbas, paint a multi-faceted picture of honour-related violence. The book comes as a response to increased interest in honour-based acts of violence, which, as the authors observe, are on the rise, and provides an overview of four intrinsically interwoven phenomena, which are posited as the foci of an insightful analysis composed of 15 scholarly essays and research papers. The main and bold aim of the book is to delineate the theoretical and ethical parameters of a study of honour-related violence. In addition to constructing and developing this theoretical framework, the authors endeavour to create a typology of honour-based crimes, investigating the role of different variables within the socio-legal context, especially the role of Islam. More practically, the volume is intended to scrutinise the function of legal and judicial systems in preventing such crimes, and to offer suggestions to policy-makers, although the proposed reforms pertain only to Western legislative culture. To realise these goals, the volume draws upon an extensive variety of qualitative research, as well as the expertise of practitioners from various backgrounds: lawyers, sociologists and criminologists, journalists, human rights activists and Islamic theologians. In such a multi-disciplinary manner, the authors explore unique features of honour-related violence and thus offer a truly in-depth analysis of the phenomenon.

The introductory chapter outlines the breadth and depth of the volume, and is followed by the contributions of the academics and experts. Honour-related violence is the main theme examined from different angles and perspectives. As the authors observe, acts of honour-related violence are found in almost all Muslim countries and Muslim dominated communities, but their analysis goes beyond religious boundaries. One of the main claims of the volume is that the concept of honour is not limited to Islam, but affects all societies and permeates all social strata, regardless of ethnic background, class or geographic location. Several chapters (two, four, six and eight) also investigate the question of honour, analysing the nature of the concept in Islam as well as in multicultural contexts, and examining the construction of the term within various legal systems. Gender dynamics is another thread running throughout, with chapters seven, nine and 13 focusing especially on gendered social interactions in Islam, and the role of men and women in acts of honour-based violence. Finally, the relationship between law, culture, community and the state is scrutinised particularly in chapters three, five, ten, 11, 14 and 15 with respect to the practices of challenging honour-related violence, particularly in terms of 'what must be done' (p. 8) in order to eliminate crimes of honour.

The book's value lies in a number of aspects. First, it provides a contemporary overview of crimes of honour in relation to Muslim women, in Muslim communities, in both Western and non-Western societies. In addition to the legal and sociological dimensions, the volume competently explores the political, economic, cultural and historical factors that affect the dynamics of honour-related violence. Second, the publication contributes to a more refined understanding of the problem of honour-related violence in Islam, and challenges some of the widely held assumptions regarding the issues presented. Instead of focusing on honour crimes as a phenomenon directed against women and typical exclusively for Muslims societies, the book presents a more sophisticated picture of honour related violence permeating all societies, religions and social classes. Last, but not least, *Honour, Violence, Women and Islam* outlines and suggests potential avenues for future research, and is particularly persuasive in its emphasis upon the need for an interdisciplinary approach.

Disappointingly for the reader, this description of what the book offers highlights that its greatest strength is also its greatest weakness. As a collection of essays, *Honour, Violence, Women and Islam* offers an extremely broad perspective; however, it does not reach its full potential, perhaps due to its ambitious agenda, and only partially succeeds in attaining the goals mentioned in the preface, particularly in its comparative scope. In reading the volume, it becomes clear that the authors are not working in concert, but are isolated in their writing, with little evidence of debate between, or, at the very least, acknowledgement of, co-contributors. For example, the analysis of Banaz Mahmood's case is discussed in two different chapters, without the authors referring to each other. Moreover, the collection suffers from a lack of consistent terminology, which can be confusing, as the narrative moves swiftly from 'domestic' (p.32) to 'honour killings' or 'femicide' (p.129) to 'violence against women' (pp. 218-231). Furthermore, the volume fails to exhibit a balanced comparative dimension. While the situation in the UK is discussed extensively, the choice of other countries, like Turkey, Jordan and Syria, Sweden, or sub-Saharan states, seems, at best, arbitrary, and the parallels and divergences between them are not explored systematically. Another impediment that confronts the reader is the overly utopian and, at times, contradictory prescriptions that *Honour, Violence, Women and Islam* suggests. But the major downside of the book comes from the fact that due to the varied backgrounds of the authors, the articles do not all have the same scientific value and relevance.

Honour, Violence, Women and Islam is among the first complete guides to honour-related violence, and undoubtedly represents a valuable source of information and point of reference for everyone interested in this area of study – postgraduates and academics interested in this area of study, social workers dealing with honour related violence and policy makers alike. It is suitable for anyone seeking a broader picture of the sociological and legal contexts of crimes of honour.