

**CCMW POSITION ON FEMICIDE [not honour killing]****January 2012****Position:**

The Canadian Council of Muslim Women is strongly opposed to the use of the term “honour killing” to describe the murder of women and girls.

Our argument is that no murder of a woman should be categorized by the rationale provided by the murderer, or by society itself, whether it be so called honour killing or crimes of passion.

We urge that all murders/killings be identified as femicide – the killing of women and girls simply because they are females. This includes the killing of girls as infants - infanticide. This term does not separate women and girls into distinct groups based on race, culture or religion, and murders are the crimes committed against anyone of them.

We hold that all forms of violence against women are regressive because somewhere in here lies misogyny and the lessened value of the lives of women and girls.

**CCMW reasoning:**

What is our reluctance to use the label of honour killing in Canada?

The Quran has no mention of any kind of death for adultery or unchaste behavior. It has the punishment of lashing for both men and women, bad enough but no stoning. Yet it is us Muslims who are now stoning women – a sad commentary on Muslim communities in Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan.

By our refusal in Canada to label any murder as “honour killing” we are stating unequivocally that we reject the whole context and rationale for any murder of women.

For us Canadians to label these murders as “honour killings” is both divisive and dangerous.

It makes these murders exotic, foreign, and alien to Western culture as if the West is free from all forms of patriarchy. It excludes those of us who identify as being Western but also with non-European attributes of religion or ethnicity or race.

It encourages blatant racism for some, as it gives them permission to blame “those people” and demand their ousting from Canada. It makes others defensive or apologetic about their culture or religion, and blocks any acknowledgement that these murders do irreparable harm to religion and culture.

For others who differentiate these women's killings as part of their culture, it gives them reasons for using cultural relativism as the argument to lessen the horror of the crimes, and to make these women's lives less valued.

To those who insist that this type of violence is not part of violence against women, would they want considerations such as culture or religion to mitigate the punishment for these murders?

For some of us, naming this kind of murder of women and girls as "honour killing" and laying the blame on specific cultures, ignores the fundamental issues of patriarchy, tribalism, control and power over women. This is what we should address at law and policy level and in education of newer immigrants.

There are many reasons given by perpetrators for their violence against women, but should these be accepted - whether as cultural, or for the honour of the family, or due to jealousy, or drunkenness, or for economic reasons such as "dowry deaths"?

Why should we, as sane compassionate persons, accept their rationales and call it "honour killing" as if that is somehow less heinous?

As Canadians, we must uphold the U.N's recommendation that there be no invocation of custom, tradition or religion to justify violence against women and girls.

There is no honour in killing, so let us banish this oxymoronic statement from our Canadian lexicon and from our understanding of Violence against women.

We do not want to be part of any "world movement" to acquiesce to the term or to such violence or to spend time on understanding the justification of family honour.

This is not to deny that CCMW is supportive of women's organizations in other parts of the world, such as the Iranian and Kurdish Women's Rights organization's campaign – the International Campaign Against Honour Killings [ICAHK]

**Definition of Femicide:**

Although most labels are problematic, some are more harmful than others, such as honour killing. We acknowledge that identification of issues/events and occurrences are sometimes necessary and so we prefer the term femicide.

Femicide is defined as the killing of females perpetrated by males, and sometimes females assist in the murder. This includes infanticide of girls.

When other women have been involved in murders, it is important to remember that they have absorbed the patriarchal model of family honour. An example is the research study in Palestine which concludes,

“Palestinian females not only internalized the social mores and expectations of males, they also behaved accordingly. Hence, it was not unexpected to have detected self-blame amongst almost all of the cases treated...”

*Mapping & Analyzing the Landscape of Femicide in Palestinian Society.  
Report by N. Shalhoub-Kevorkian, submitted to UNIFEM, Jan 2000.*

Femicide, as a definition, avoids inferences about the motives of the killers, and clearly states that violence is used as a tool against females and murders are the extreme end of the continuum of violence against women and girls.

### **Violence against women:**

Defining the murder by the rationale for the killing diminishes the death of the woman, as it shifts the focus from the woman to the perpetrator.

We believe the definition of violence against women is broad enough to encompass all forms of violence done to women and girls.

The 1993 U.N. Declaration on Elimination of Violence against Women definition includes any intentional use of physical force with potential for causing death, injury or harm. This includes all forms of violence including spousal violence and violence against children.

The Declaration states, “recognizing that VAW is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men...VAW is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men.”

The Declaration recommends that a state not allow any justification of VAW by anyone invoking “custom, tradition or religious considerations.”

The murder of women by their families has been around for centuries. The 1790 B.C Code of Hammurabi of Babylon was patriarchal and strong on maintaining the integrity of the family, and the 1705 B.C Assyrian Law of Mesopotamia, had death for adultery. The Bible’s patriarchy is well known and the punishment for adultery/fornication is severe.

For example, in Deuteronomy chapter 22: verse 2, it states

“They shall bring out this damsel to the door of her father’s house, and the men of her city shall stone her with stones that she die, because she hath wrought folly in Israel, to play the whore in her father’s house: so shall thou put evil away from among you.”

This Biblical quote is as much about tribe and patriarchy as any, there is no mention of punishment of males.

**Emphasis on Cultural differences/Cultural Relativism:**

This brings us to the question of diversity and respect for cultural differences in Canada, whether it is justified as part of Multiculturalism or cultural and religious rights.

Too often multiculturalism is invoked to divide people, and to segregate us rather than to bring us together.

We agree with the statement made at the 2004 Swedish Conference: Combating Patriarchal VAW, one of the participants - Ayse Feride Acar stated that:

“CEDAW Committee has noted that in a number of culturally and ethnically diverse societies and in countries that have large immigrant populations, what has been called respect for traditions, culture or religion of minorities has in fact impeded the protection of women’s human rights.”

As minority women we are often dismayed by many who use cultural relativist arguments to bend backwards to accommodate all practices, not understanding that they end up hindering our struggle for our gender equality.

What are the limits of cultural tolerance? How do we build a pluralistic society that both respects different cultural traditions and requires that citizens abide by a set of common laws and norms –for example, freedom, justice and equality for all?

To us, the yardstick to measure the limits are fairly clear if we relate these to the rights of citizenship which must take precedence over membership of communities. This will not eliminate the contest between defending human rights versus the cultural or religious rights of communities, but we must try.

**Concept of family honour:**

Family honour is a fine concept, but it is much abused within the context of tribal patriarchy. In the West, more often honour has changed to be synonymous with personal integrity, rather than the emphasis on the prestige or standing of the family, community or tribe.

One of the major causes of VAW is patriarchy, and we submit that it is more specifically tribal patriarchy. Although, this is a universal reality, it is true that some communities/ countries continue to be more patriarchal, while others have made efforts to dismantle this abusive system for both men and women.

The social order of patriarchy is that the father/ male is central and dominant. It is the male who is the norm for being human while women don’t measure up because they don’t fit the norm of maleness. Women and girls are the dependents of the father and so they must be obedient and subject to social control. Patriarchal values

are about men, and to maintain the family's and the community's reputation with scant attention to women or children.

A tribe has an internal social structure, with shared beliefs, strong feelings of identity and loyalty. The tribe believes in its' own superiority, and is exclusive rather than inclusive. With men as central to the structure, women and children are seen as belonging to the tribe and family. The strong sense of belonging to a tribe can be and has been politically manipulated. Tribalism is of course the opposite of pluralism.

The prestige of the tribe and the family dominates and the welfare of the group takes precedence over any individuals - especially lowly women. Any sign of rebellion is seen as threatening the tribal solidarity. This combination of tribe and patriarchy governs the lives of women.

This loyalty to the tribe also extends to revenge killing and vendettas which affect the men of the tribe. Because we are discussing VAW does not mean that we are ignoring violence against boys and men, but sadly most perpetrators happen to be men.

### **Naming a murder "honour killing"**

With regard to the insistence to identify some murders as honour killing, I think we should ask questions such as,

What is the motivation to name these specific killings?

How does this help the women as victims?

What is the purpose in separating these murders from the other murders?

To what avail? Will there be more severe punishment?

Who is defining them? Is it the perpetrators who seek to legitimize or dignify the murder, or is it done for racial or religious discrimination to separate some women from the sisterhood of all women?

If we separate these murders, will this not lead to the perpetrators using the justification of family honour to mitigate their punishment? The argument can easily be that it is beyond me as an individual; it is called for by my family/my community. If it is plain murder, we don't need any rationale to understand the killing.

### **In Canada:**

We appreciate that other countries may use this term, honour killing, but we are reluctant to join them in identifying any murder for the preservation of the family's honour.

Canada is not Jordan or any other country, and comparisons don't assist us here. We must address the issue in Canada and not elsewhere.

We are very fortunate that in Canada there has been a concerted effort to improve the situation for women with laws and services. However, before we become too complaisant, please remember that in 2007, there were 74 spousal homicides reported to police across Canada, and in Ontario alone there have been 25 female victims every year from 1975-2004, totaling 725 in 30 years. Women under the age of 25 are at greater risk of homicide by men they know and the murder of children by either parent is also part of VAW.

Recently, there has been increased media attention on certain murders, mostly committed in newer immigrant communities, which have been designated as "honour killings." This labeling leads to grave injustices for all of us, including families, women and girls of such communities.

Many people, including media, academics and professionals are trying to build a list of so called honour killings using their own criteria of characteristics.

This is plain dangerous and incorrect, as Canada does not keep distinct statistics under the label of honour killing. It is dangerous when some individuals state that there have been 13 or 15 honour killings in Canada, when no such statistics have been kept.

We have heard of "experts on honour killings" who have added to the racism and discrimination towards communities, without adding any knowledge which could assist.

As an example, one such expert provided a generalization that violence against women is continuous and not premeditated, while honour killing is a planned deliberate act. He even goes further to state that there may be signs of mental illness in honour killing. One can imagine how well this plays into the murderer's defence.

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Interview with Ezra Levant, Oct 28/2011.*

Canada should follow the lead of several countries such as South America, Palestine and many countries in the East, by abandoning the term honour killing and instead using the term femicide.

Femicide will not disappear, but we cannot separate murders of women and girls by race, ethnicity, culture or race. In Canada, we should address the issue according to our values and our laws as articulated in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms as well as various policies.