

From Honor and Shame to Pride and Joy: Changing Mother-Daughter Relationships to Gender Violence

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"Honor and Shame" (H/S) constructions of social reality are hallmarks of tribally organized societies based on kinship and affiliation status. Usually within this construct, women and girls are considered less important than males, are to be governed by their male family members, and variance from social codes of female conduct elicits violence in the name of family "honor". Muslim-majority countries are noted for their H/S codes of social organization. Often this is attributed to the religion of Islam, but historical studies show that H/S societies preceded Islam, and that early forms of Judaism and Christianity shared the same approach to regulation of female lives. Most modern Islamic cultures developed without a secular "enlightenment" or industrial revolutions. Those historical developments paved the way for more diversity in civil society in the West (education, a middle class, work opportunities, bureaucracies, and government engagement in development). Under colonialism, the advancement of women's rights was often viewed as a pernicious colonial 'violation' visited upon conquered countries, so that rather than being embraced as a universal good, it was a form of 'Westernization' to be resisted as another form of colonial erosion of indigenous values and culture.

In H/S societies, it is important to note that:

- most honor crimes against women take place within the family context, where social taboos against outside intervention remain strong in most societies. Many times, such violence is not recognized as criminal, but considered private, reasonable and customary, and in no need of reform.

- there is very little possibility of any kind of viable alternate life path for females outside the family context: no place to run, hide, work, flourish or choose a life of her own. Mothers are often more likely to urge conformity than challenge as a form of protection for their daughters.

- mothers, often the victims of harsh treatment themselves, have often been deprived of full psychological agency through the mechanisms of child marriage. They often become full, if not willing, participants in the violent retaliation against their daughters for infractions against the H/S code of the family.

Practices, however, are changing.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of feminist activists and jurists, theologians, law enforcement, medical professionals, development agencies, and worldwide solidarity, the ready acceptance of 'crimes of honor' against women, is slowly shifting. The so-called "honor killing" has, in the terms of Human Rights, now been classified as a 'non-judicial summary execution' and is recognized as a human rights abuse which must be reported, investigated and punished. Like FGM and child marriage, maintenance of female codes of sexual purity through violence are becoming less and less acceptable in some societies. Why? How?

Mothers and girls who are the beneficiaries of greater levels of education are the slow wave that is eroding the endless shore of violence against women and girls. Attitudes change when there are more economic opportunities, such that the daughter becomes a valuable member for more than just her ability to advance family status through marriage and economic benefits that attend it. For example, in Bangladesh where women are now entering into work situations outside the home, the notion of 'purdah' or sequestration of

women and extreme veiling, has begun to be reinterpreted by mothers and daughters, where the daughters work outside the home. Now 'purdah' becomes an inner attitude of modesty and right conduct out in the world, rather than the literal need to remain inside the home. A 'nice' girl may work and have a proud mother, if the requirements of modesty are being met in a way that makes sense in the new economic situation in which the family finds itself.

We can also see in various communities that when disasters strike, honor and shame go out the window as family groups cope. Some examples of this would be the sudden need to flee, a tragic death creating a young widow now considered 'bad luck', an arrest, kidnapping of daughters or their disappearance as war captives. The simple realities of a slave or migrant family being sold apart and daughters forced to find new 'fictional' parents or foster homes creates the conditions for change. In such cases, mothers and daughters find themselves without any possibility of 'respectability', according to the old standards of family honor. They must step outside the culture bonds of the family to reject their supposed 'shame', to create a new sense of themselves. In these cases, the mother, or 'fictive' / adopted mother or mentor becomes a rich source of power to survive, resist, and flourish, rather than an enforcer of violence on the daughter's body. The daughter, can become instead the 'pride and joy' of the mother, rather than the open secret of a 'bad daughter' (widow, rape survivor, returned captive, paroled prisoner) that brands her mother as a failed protector of their family's honor. Mothers who sacrifice to see their daughters escape the destiny of violence now take pride in the Survivor daughter. A bond of mutual joy replaces the tragic fate of being born woman.

These tendrils of hope show the incredible strength of mothers and daughters to transform the worst of circumstances into a radical movement into a new space of cooperation, understanding and mutual support. There are real lived stories of this Female Rebirth: mothers who envision a life for their daughters that really might surpass the restrictions and heartbreak that they knew; daughters who flourish and justify their mothers' passage into the unknown. In such ways, revolutions begin, and grow prosper.

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