



Action on Child  
Early and Forced Marriage

## Parents suffocated girl, 17, with plastic bag for 'wearing short-sleeved top'

### Five important questions and answers about honour based violence

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The above headline captures the horrific high profile case of Shafilea Ahmed, 17, who was killed in the UK by her parents in front of her siblings for bringing 'dishonour' on the family by wearing a short sleeved top that exposed her bare arms. Her parents pinned her to the sofa and forced a plastic carrier bag into her mouth until she suffocated. Parents claimed she had run away from home, but her body was found several months later in a river. Whilst this example of honour based violence is shocking and made the headlines, around 75% of cases are never reported.

#### 1. What is honour based violence (HBV)?

Honour based violence (HBV) is a widespread form of gender based violence (GBV) which occurs across societies but is not limited to any specific country, religion or ethnic group. Although no universal definition of HBV exists, it is seen as a value system for controlling women's sexuality, purity and virginity in which they are expected to conform to certain codes of behaviour. In some patriarchal societies, from birth, a girl's body carries the family's honour and male family members feel-duty bound to defend it. HBV is a violation of human rights, discriminates against women and is an oppressive practice. The notion of 'protecting women's honour' is linked to the parallel idea of avoiding shame which is said to result when dishonour is brought on the family. HBV is usually premeditated, condoned by the wider community and justified as a means of protecting or restoring family honour. Punishments for any actual or perceived transgressions include threats, coercion, blackmail, isolation, intimidation, abduction, kidnapping, mutilation, beatings, acid attacks, asphyxiation, burning, torture and killing women and girls and occasionally men and boys who may be lovers.

#### 2. Who are the perpetrators?

The main perpetrators are usually males - intimate partners, fathers, brothers, uncles, in-laws, and non-family members of the community, but females can also be complicit, for example the mother.

#### 3. Why is HBV carried out?

The reasons for HBV are varied and include pre-marital/extra marital sex, loss of virginity or pregnancy before marriage, refusing an arranged marriage, wanting a divorce, dressing in an unacceptable way, e.g., refusing to wear a hijab or exposing parts of the body such as arms, wearing make-up, working outside the home, wanting to marry someone outside the community or engaging in same sex relations.

#### 4. How common is HBV?

There is little data on HBV, but estimates suggest 75% of cases are not reported. Under-reporting may be due to women being confined to the home, lacking the financial means to leave home, their access to phone, internet, friends, etc. may be monitored or restricted, fear of reprisals, language barriers, difficulty in accessing the justice system, having an insecure immigration status, lack of awareness of the support available to them and how to access it, and HBV remains a taboo subject which is often viewed as a private family matter.

#### 5. What are the harmful effects of HBV?

Victims may suffer physical injuries, poor mental health (depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, hopelessness, desperation) and self-harm. Families may steal their belongings when they leave the house with the police, and once women report a crime, they can rarely go back, and will be ostracized. In the worst cases, victims are killed in so called 'honour killings' or they may end their own life.

#### So, what can be done to address HBV?

HBV must be addressed at both the policy and practice level:

- Raise awareness of HBV as a whole of society approach is necessary to address it;
- Provide rapid safety from physical harm, speak to victim alone, away from family members;
- Treat victims with dignity, empathy, and validate their experiences;
- Offer diverse ways for victims to report HBV e.g., online or through apps;
- Spread awareness of protection procedures and publicize the help available to victims;
- Establish special police units trained in understanding HBV, recruit female police officers from ethnic minorities for their cultural knowledge and language skills;
- Raise awareness of HBV in schools, universities, workplaces, places of worship, doctors surgeries, etc. and display help numbers in public spaces e.g., on public transport, in women's toilets, etc as well as through social media;
- Improve training and cultural sensitivity of the judiciary, police, social workers, health care professionals and teachers and educate local communities;
- Foster good community liaison between the police and local communities;
- Encourage female police officers go to places of worship to talk about GBV and HBV;
- Break the taboos around HBV, encourage victims to report cases and receive support;
- Collect data and conduct research to improve understanding to address this complex issue;
- Establish one stop centres with access to shelters, healthcare and psychological support, legal advice, and forensic labs;
- Implement and enforce laws against HBV in countries where it is prevalent;
- Governments should produce national action plans and commit resources to address HBV.

During the 16-day campaign on gender based violence and beyond we all have a role to play in advocating for its prevention and the protection of women and girls.

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