



Chumir Ethics Forum

Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership



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Thinking About Ethical Leadership:

“Honour” killings and other violence against women

By Janet Keeping, President



In late June reports started to appear on four bizarre deaths. The bodies were found in a car stuck underwater in a St. Lawrence Seaway lock near Kingston, Ontario.

At first the victims' Montreal family appeared devastated by the deaths. But within days, the father, mother and brother of the three youngest victims were

charged with having murdered both them and the fourth victim, a middle-aged woman, apparently a second wife of the older accused male. The family, originally from Afghanistan, had recently come to Canada. According to some media, the accused husband/father found the now deceased wife and at least some of his dead daughters difficult to control.

While unproven – trials have yet to take place – many think these were “honour” killings. In media coverage of the deaths, some columnists called upon Canadians to express publicly their abhorrence of “honour” killings. I agree that we who care about women's dignity and equality should do this, but carefully, to avoid unfair stereotyping and unnecessarily increasing tensions over cultural difference.

In this article, I suggest a framework for thinking through this terrible topic.

What makes a murder an “honour” killing?

I offer this definition: A killing is an “honour” killing where one member, or more, of a family, kills another member of that family to protect what they understand to be the family's honour.

Where there is a single killer, that person is usually male, and where the killing is carried out by a group, the group is usually led by male relatives of the victim. But there are differences in how these killings take place. For example, in northern Pakistan, the victim's mother-in-law is almost always a key participant in her death. The object of an “honour” killing need not be female.¹ But here I focus on typical “honour” killings, where the victim is a woman or girl.

There are two distinctive elements of “honour” killings. First, the killing is motivated by a desire to repair or salvage the family's “honour.” The perpetrators consider protection of family “honour” more important than the life of the victim.

Second, many people from the same culture as the perpetrators would approve of the killing. In many countries significant efforts are underway to end “honour” killings. But so far it remains true – in many societies a substantial proportion of the population thinks that killing in defense of family “honour” is acceptable.

These two elements distinguish “honour” killings from other domestic violence. Most such violence in Canada is not motivated by “honour.” And although domestic violence is widespread in Canada, it is not condoned, but rather condemned by most as an unacceptable way to resolve family problems. On the other hand, in many societies “honour” killing is deeply imbedded in tradition² and is legal or, if technically illegal, the “courts commute or reduce sentences of ‘honour’ killers.”³

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¹“Honour”-motivated violence is carried out not only against women but sometimes against others who are considered unworthy of respect as full-fledged human beings, for example, gays, in particular gay men.

² For example, Jordan and Syria.

Have “honour” killings occurred in Canada?

We don’t know yet whether the deaths of the four females from Montreal were “honour” killings. But there are other proven cases. According to one expert, “In Canada in the last decade, about a dozen women have died as a result of [their allegedly] dishonourable acts.”⁴

While much more common in the Middle East, Central and South Asia and some other parts of the developing world, “honour” killings have also occurred in the US, Australia and western Europe.

What do we know about “honour” killings?

1. *“Honour” killings are murder.*

“Honour” killings are unjustifiable killings which, if committed in Canada, will be treated as murder by Canadian law. There is no legal doubt: it is murder to intentionally kill your daughter, for example, for dating a man of whom you do not approve.

2. *“Honour” killings constitute the “tip of the iceberg.”*

As we know about domestic violence generally (see immediately below), where there is one death there are dozens of assaults, hundreds of threats and so on. It is not only the deaths (the tip of the iceberg) which we should denounce, but the entire edifice of oppression which women endure when family “honour” is thought to depend on women’s “purity” or “obedience.”

3. *“Honour” killings exacerbate our already serious problem of domestic violence.*

We must acknowledge the scope of violence against women and the magnitude of their oppression across the world, including in countries such as Canada, where human rights protections are relatively advanced. Most of this violence has nothing explicitly to do with notions of “honour.”

Much of this widespread violence against women is domestic – perpetrated by family members, usually partners – but not all. Domestic violence would be a significant problem in Canada even without the occurrence of “honour”-based violence. It is worse with that element added.

³ Elsie Hambrook, “It all looks like violence against women to me,” *Moncton Times and Transcript*, August 27, 2009.

⁴ Elsie Hambrook, “It all looks like violence against women to me.” Although mainstream Canadian society does not condone such violence, members of some communities within our country apparently do.

4. *“Honour” killings are not unique to any one culture.*

An exhaustive list of the cultures in which “honour” killings take place is not necessary. It suffices that “honour” killings, and other violence and coercion motivated by “honour,” occur not only in Muslim cultures or only amongst Muslim immigrant families. This kind of violence also occurs in Sikh communities, for example.

5. *“Honour” killings are not tied to any particular religion.*

There is no need to treat “honour” killings and the related sense of “honour” as part of certain religious traditions. For example, Ismaili Muslims from Kenya tell us that, prior to coming to Canada, they had never heard of “honour” killings, let alone been aware of actual instances of them. The basis for “honour” killings is cultural, not religious.

Alia Hogben, of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW), puts it this way: “I don’t think one can blame the teachings of any religions such as Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism or Christianity for [violence against women], even though each has elements of patriarchy. It is more that some cultures continue to value patriarchy, the assigned roles of men and women and the inequality of the sexes.”⁵

6. *There is an ethical distinction between “honour” killings and other domestic violence in Canada.*

It is one thing to kill in a fit of jealousy or to take tyrannical patriarchy to the extent of lethal violence. But it is quite another to kill a member of your own family intentionally, especially your own child, to satisfy a sense of family “honour,” which is premised upon a desire to maintain appearances in your cultural community. The latter is especially horrifying, because the reason for the violence reveals such a shallow moral sensibility. Killing *can* be justified, for example, in self-defense: I kill because otherwise I will be killed. But to kill – again especially, a close family member – because other people think she did something terribly wrong, or even worse, because something terribly wrong (for example, sexual assault) was done to her, is profoundly cruel and immoral.

But it is also important not to overstate the ethical gulf between those who think it is permissible, perhaps even

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⁵ Alia Hogben, “There’s no honour when four women killed,” *Kingston Whig-Standard*, August 8, 2009.

Letter from Bangladesh

I arrived in Bangladesh at the beginning of May, terrified to spend the next four months in a country that was in political upheaval, about to enter into its infamous monsoon season, and to top it off, where I knew not a single person. But when I left four months later, I was heart-broken over having to say goodbye to the culture, colour, and people that had utterly captivated me. I felt so inspired by the people of Bangladesh, who face incredible obstacles on a daily basis but continue to live with a courage and generosity that I had never seen before.

I went to Bangladesh for a volunteer internship with a micro-finance NGO which specializes in providing small (“micro”) loans to people who are too poor or have too little collateral to qualify for loans from regular commercial banks.

During my time, I learned an enormous amount about the massive, complex field of micro-finance which currently has over 20 million active clients in Bangladesh alone (86% of them are women), and also about the difficult path to development that faces Bangladesh. Providing the extreme poor with a small amount of capital to help them buy needed resources, whether equipment for their farms, wood to fix the roofs of their houses, or supplies to start their own small businesses, undoubtedly goes a long way towards helping them survive, and if they’re lucky, eventually helping them lift themselves out of poverty.

However, it doesn’t address the deeper causes of the nation’s struggles, including widespread corruption in the government and police force, a lack of lucrative natural resources, arsenic-ridden ground water that makes bottled water the only safe alternative, and severe vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change.



Photo Credit: Reuters

“I felt so inspired by the people of Bangladesh, who face incredible obstacles on a daily basis but continue to live with a courage and generosity that I had never seen before.”

The experience made me realize that development is an extraordinarily multi-faceted issue, and must be treated as such, if any meaningful progress is to be made. Aid from international donors should address various aspects of development, including health, education, sanitation and the creation of jobs, because all

these factors are inextricably inter-related.

As just one example, the health of children has a direct impact on their attendance at school, which of course, determines the level of education they attain, the type of jobs they qualify for, and the income they will eventually earn.

I also learned, however, how incredibly difficult it is for development programs, whether they are implemented by NGOs, the government or even the private sector, to have a long-term impact on people’s lives. Since programs (and their funding) do not continue into infinity, the programs must be designed to change people’s habits and lifestyles to adopt the new practices.

This can include things like actually sending children to school once the schools have been built rather than sending them to work, or using cook stoves that are slightly more difficult to operate but funnel the smoke outside the house, thus eliminating the respiratory and eye diseases that members of the household frequently contract from indoor air pollution. But habits are phenomenally hard to change, so often the effect of the program tends to fade once the program itself is over.

But here’s the good news: the country has seen such rapid progress over the last 50 years that it has garnered attention all over the world. The development of the garment industry has provided jobs (leading to 6% average GDP growth per annum over the last six years), the NGO sector has improved the lives of thousands through providing food, education, clean water and credit, and life expectancies have risen as maternal mortality and birth rates have dropped.

I saw the end result of these changes when, for instance, I met people who grew up with many siblings but have chosen to only have one or two children themselves, or when I saw groups of people on their way home from a shift at the garment factories. Change was also visible when I visited the micro-finance clients of the NGO I worked with.

They would describe the businesses they've built with their loans, which have allowed them to earn enough money to send their children to school.

After seeing the challenges and successes that Bangladeshis experience, I can't help but feel that my career lies in the development arena. I was always intrigued by it, but the passion for, and the dedication to, helping their country that Bangladeshi people from all walks of life have – whether through working for an NGO, or building a renewable energy business, or teaching the country's youth – has instilled the same passion and dedication in me.

Bangladesh is on a tidal wave of change, and it has swept me along, and I am that much better for it.

*Raksha Vasudaven
B.Comm., University of Calgary*

*Raksha completed an internship with the
Bangladesh Association for Social Advancement.
The Chumir Foundation provided a small grant
in support of her internship.*



Photo Credit: Raksha Vasudevan

"Honour" killings...continued from page 2

obligatory, to preserve family "honour" at the expense of women's lives or liberty and those who commit violence against female family members, where "honour" is not involved.

It may be useful when thinking about violence against them to see the status of women worldwide on a continuum. At one end of the spectrum, women are treated like objects, or domesticated animals; at the other, they are considered fully equal as human beings. In Canada, for a variety of reasons, we have moved much further along the path to genuine equality for women than have most other societies. But much of that progress is of recent vintage.

In both Canadian custom and law, it is still easy to find vestiges of the old ways of thinking about women and violence against them. In many weddings, for example, there is still talk of "giving away" the bride. It is usually the father who hands her off to her new husband. The echo of the past is clear: a woman must not for one moment be free from male control.

In law too we find traces of what was earlier prevalent – the view that men had a legal right to control over "their" women. One example is the defence of provocation which is available only to reduce a charge of murder to manslaughter. The essential idea is that the accused was so enraged, i.e. "provoked," that he (or rarely she) was incapable of forming the intention necessary for murder. Although it has been used in other circumstances, the usual invocation of the provocation defense is by a man who has killed his female partner, historically, when he found her in bed with someone else.

It would be difficult, but perhaps useful, to figure out how "honour" has played a role in the provocation defence over time. For example, to what extent has this indulgence of male rage depended upon a notion of "honour"? I have always thought of provocation as a kind of a temporary insanity defense, with the difference that, if accepted, the accused was not entirely excused from punishment but rather received a lower sentence. Of course, there is still the question, but what caused the temporary insanity? Was it an "honour"-related notion?

A further complicating factor is that there may be mixed motives at work in domestic violence. Some "honour" killings in Canada may be about restoring family honour,

such as you would find in Central or South Asia. But it is possible (perhaps probable) that a number are not only that. Some of the motivations at work in more “typical” family violence may also be present, such as extreme frustration with a teenager who seems determined to pursue what the parent thinks is a dangerous course, for example, dating an unsuitable person. Then it’s about pure control.

What should we be saying publicly about “honour” killings?

We have to try to ensure that in drawing attention to the differences between “honour” killings and other forms of violence against women we are doing a good thing. Some people worry that by using the label “honour” killings, law- and policy-makers might draw the wrong conclusion and treat those killings less seriously than other forms of violence against women.

CCMW expresses this concern: “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. We do not want to be part of any ‘world movement’ to acquiesce to such violence.”⁶ CCMW members use the case of a female Muslim student who was sexually assaulted in her Toronto high school to explain their worry. School officials failed to report the assault to the police for fear that her family would punish her for ruining family “honour.”

No doubt, school officials betrayed this Toronto student horribly. But there is no evidence that “honour”-motivated violence is taken less seriously in Canadian law or by Canadian law-enforcement officials than other crimes inflicting similar harm. Further, the sexual assault of the Muslim student in Toronto wasn’t “honour”-motivated, nor was the school’s response an instance of “honour”-inspired violence being taken lightly. Rather, school officials were misled by their own stereotyped thinking of Muslim families. They assumed that because the victim was Muslim her family would, upon hearing of the assault, harm her rather than support her. The case powerfully illustrates the need to talk about violence against girls and women, including “honour” killings, in order to de-bunk the many misconceptions that surround that abuse.

Moreover, according to Canadian criminal law “honour” killing should perhaps be punished more severely, not less. Section 718.2 of the Canadian *Criminal Code* allows a judge to hand down a more serious penalty for crimes where there is “evidence that the offence was motivated by bias, prejudice or hate based on race, national or ethnic origin, religion, sex, age, mental or physical disability, sexual orientation, or any other similar factor.” It would be very difficult to deny that an “honour” killing was “motivated by bias, prejudice or hate based on ... sex.”

There is also the fear that, by naming the violence an “honour” crime, we feed into stereotyping of the cultures in which “honour” plays a strong role. On this line of thinking, since the concept of “honour” plays an especially strong role, for example, in Muslim cultures, Muslims as a whole should be held accountable for “honour” killings. So use of the term “honour” killing may exacerbate Islamophobia and contribute to an aversion to other cultures in which “honour” violence against women is found, for example, amongst Sikhs.

And we do know that, as soon as talk turns to problematic behaviour associated with specific “different” cultures, some people will take that concern as license to criticize all members of that culture, even though there is no evidence for such sweeping condemnation.

This happens, and we need to struggle against it. As colleagues from CCMW urge, we should be vigilant in pointing out that perpetrators of violence need to be seen as individuals, not as representatives of certain groups. Just as Christians as a whole do not have to take responsibility for the abuses of, for example, fundamentalist Mormons practicing polygamy which profoundly discriminates against women, Muslims and Sikhs as entire communities don’t have to carry the can for those who justify the oppression of girls and women in the name of “honour.”

But we can’t let the fact of racism silence what needs to be said. As noted above, “honour” killings really are different from other forms of violence against women, and denial of reality is seldom helpful.

⁶Alia Hogben, “There’s no honour when four women killed.”

From the Media Room

What are the benefits of discussion of “honour” killings?

There may be several. The possibility of averting violence of this kind may be enhanced. Many good-hearted people urge us, correctly I think, “to reach out to newcomer women here who may be at risk.”⁷ Outreach is more likely to be effective if “honour”-inspired violence is publicly discussed and thus better understood.

There may also be opportunities to help potential perpetrators. This might seem far-fetched, but where there are indicators of possible trouble, exposing families to other models of masculinity or parenting might be of real use.⁸ Again, if we can’t talk about the problem, we’re going to have a much harder time constructively addressing it.

Perhaps, most importantly, there is the enormous value of greater honesty in our public discourse. Too much of what passes for public debate, in particular, on diversity issues and especially on the lower status of women in some cultural communities is less than honest.

Conclusions

While there is much more that needs saying, I conclude with two observations. First, it is important to discuss “honour” killings as a distinct form of violence against women. There are unique forces at work in “honour”-motivated oppression and it is counter-productive to stifle acknowledgement of them. Second, if we are to live together well in our hugely diverse society, discussions of “honour”-oppression must be sensitively conducted, so that more good than harm ensues from them.

Comments: jkeeping@chumirethicsfoundation.ca



Flowers sit near Kingston Mills locks on the Rideau Canal where three teenage sisters and their father's first wife died, possibly “honour” killings. Photo Credit: (Sunny Freeman/Canadian Press)

⁷ Elsie Hambrook, “It all looks like violence against women to me.”

⁸ There is much more that needs to be said about helping men to understand and take on non-violent standards of masculinity.

Website & Media Updates

We have added some new features to our website to help you keep up-to-date on Foundation publications and events. Our new **RSS feed** displays our media releases and bi-monthly op-eds; sign up by clicking the RSS link in your web browser, or here:

<http://www.chumirethicsfoundation.ca/rssnews.xml>

Our media work is on the rise. Recently we’ve given interviews to various media on topics such as the ethical implications of the economic downturn, Bill 44, and issues related to diversity and human rights.

Our op-eds have addressed issues such as privacy in a digital world, the ethics of debate, and religious rights and freedoms. They have appeared in newspapers across the country.

You can **search** Foundation publications by title, author, keywords, etc. in our new **Publications** database listed under our **Media Room**. www.chumirethicsfoundation.ca

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Welcome Back, Heather!



The Foundation is pleased to welcome back Heather MacIntosh after a year-long leave. Heather was in Bolivia volunteering with a fair trade network through Montreal-based NGO, CECI. While in Bolivia, she monitored two national referenda with the international election observer delegation. She returns to the Foundation as Program Director, Democratic Development and Human Rights.

One Year After the Financial Meltdown: Ordinary people still treated as collateral damage



One year ago, the collapse of Lehman Brothers sent shock waves through major financial markets and wreaked havoc in world economies. Millions of people were affected globally. Some economists see glimmers of recovery, while others suggest these positive signals may be short-lived and predict a second slump. In Alberta, many hope for another oil-and-gas-led boom to solve our current malaise.

In the search for solutions, the typical focus has been on fiscal stimulants and study of macro-economic factors. What has been largely overlooked is the personal cost of the economic meltdown, the damage inflicted upon individuals and their families and how ordinary people have experienced the worst recession since WWII. If we are to find ethical ways out of the current economic mess, we cannot go on ignoring the human suffering caused by it and the people who are enduring that suffering.

Dashed Dreams, New Realities: Calgarians Talk Frankly about the Impact of the Economic Downturn, a report recently released by a group of Calgary organizations,¹ zeroes in on the lived experiences of the economic downturn. The report focuses on the major themes which emerged from discussions involving a broad cross-section of roughly 100 Calgarians. These people had serious concerns and questions: why is EI so difficult to access when unemployment is increasing; why does the safety net seem to offer so few resources to those needing it the most or for the first time; why is it so difficult to navigate a patchwork of fragmented social services; why is there so much visible homelessness and such a lack of affordable housing; and how much worse will it get if proposed budget cuts lead to corresponding service cuts?

Participants consulted for *Dashed Dreams* had a deep thirst to be heard and to have input into planning for long-term policy solutions to better manage our economy. They demanded remedies to deal with immediate problems and lessen the risk that similar damage would be experienced in future economic cycles.

Most understood that simply praying for another boom is not enough. Many participants “wondered why governments and the corporate sector weren’t better prepared to help people

during the inevitable downturns of such a cyclical economy.”

Participants noticed the absence of compelling leadership and fresh policy thinking so needed to remedy the problems highlighted by *Dashed Dreams*.

One of the ways around this paralysis is to substantially involve the public in policy development. As *Dashed Dreams* shows, ordinary people – albeit sometimes overwhelmed by the tragedy that has befallen them, confused as to how to proceed, or incapable of understanding the bigger picture because of limited experience – often have an insightfulness that government reports or newspaper business pages lack. They see what’s happening with greater clarity because it’s happening to *them*.

One person broke into tears when she described her parents, trained as accountants, now sweeping floors to pay the rent. Another turned beet red in anger as he described his career in shambles, his house gone because EI did not start in time to meet his bank’s deadline, and his reliance upon a shelter to house him. Another woman almost began shouting in frustration because virtually overnight she lost her business, resulting in significant family upset, and she was now negotiating with child welfare officials to keep her children over a misunderstanding. These are real-life examples of the harm directly caused by the downturn – and it can’t be captured by any standard economic measure.

Given the suffering caused by the financial meltdown and economic crisis, we have an ethical responsibility to be concerned not just with ourselves but also the well-being of others. Change is needed so that individuals and their communities survive Alberta’s boom/bust economy in as humane a fashion as possible. *Dashed Dreams* shows us that we should maximize the role that ordinary people can play in the brainstorming, discussion and debate on policy alternatives aimed at achieving this goal. The question is: how do ordinary people go from being collateral damage in an economic downturn to playing a central role in finding a way out of this mess?

Kelly Ernst
Senior Program Director

http://www.chumirethicsfoundation.ca/files/pdf/Dashed_Dreams_Report_091509-lowres.pdf

¹Alberta Global Forum, Calgary Counselling Centre, Canada West Foundation, and the Sheldon Chumir Foundation for Ethics in Leadership, with support from The Calgary Foundation.

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Linda McKay-Panos, Exec. Dir, Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre
 Calgary: **Lorne Motley**, Editor-in-Chief, *Calgary Herald*
 Edmonton: **Allan Mayer**, Editor-in-Chief, *Edmonton Journal*

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CALGARY: Tuesday, OCTOBER 6

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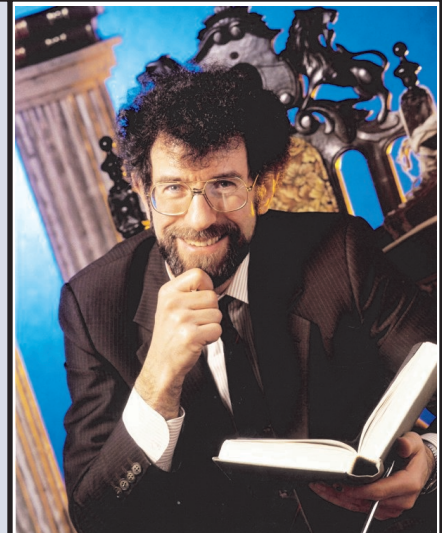
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Stay tuned for details on upcoming events!

- “**Highway 63: The Fort Mac Show**”—A play about the ethics of the oil sands. Discussion with **Andrew Nikiforuk**, author of *Tar Sands*, following the performance. **October 15, 2009**, at The Kailash Mital Theatre, Carleton University, Ottawa.
 Co-sponsor: Centre on Values and Ethics, Carleton University
- Join us on **November 26, 2009** for a discussion of Children’s Rights to Education and Alberta’s controversial *Bill 44*. 12 noon - 2:00 pm in Murray Fraser Hall (MFH) Room 2370, Faculty of Law, University of Calgary.
 Co-sponsor: Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre
- **January 2010**: Help us mark the anniversary of Sheldon Chumir’s death by participating in a discussion on civil liberties. Probable topic: Freedom of Religion in Canada: its scope and limits.



Sheldon Chumir
 (1940-1992)

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