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SUMMARY

Honour killings among Turks in the Netherlands

Clementine van Eck

This study examines honour killings committed by members of immigrant Turkish families in the Netherlands. An honour killing is the killing in order to purify defiled honour. The meaning of honour in this respect is the “namus”. For females namus is chastity. Men also are ascribed namus, that is when their feminine family members have namus. Females are not allowed to have illicit relations with males and have to be careful not to become the subject of gossip, as this can ruin their namus. Therefore females observe the namus codes of behaviour, which differ from region to region. Honour killings mainly occur in the countryside. Due to migration from the sixties onwards, former Turkish villagers do commit honour killings in cities of Turkey and the Western European countries of Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Germany and France. When namus is defiled, Turks speak of an honour problem. An honour problem has to be solved as soon as possible. Initially this has to be done without bloodshed. For restoring defiled honour, an honour killing is only the ultimate solution. When asked why an honour killing was committed, the Turkish answer generally is: “It was an honour problem”. Additional explication is seen as unnecessary. But an honour killing is not automatically committed when the honour is defiled. There are lots of honour problems that are solved without an honour killing. We should examine what led to the decision of honour killing.

I studied 30 cases of honour killing, committed by Turks in the Netherlands between 1972-1993. I did this by examining the court records of honour killings, located in the various archives of the courts, with the permission of the Ministry of Justice. In my dissertation I described 20 of these honour killings. Additionally, I presented cases of honour killings from the Turkish newspaper the Hurriyet.

In the Turkish language there are two terms for honour: “namus”, which is the chastity of female family members, and “şeref”, which is the more general word for
honour with the meaning of prestige. Whereas şeref can be gained, namus is a natural-
possession that only can get lost. Although both are very important, namus is considered
sacrosanct. Especially for Turkish villagers and former villagers now living in cities in
Turkey and Western Europe namus is important, because in their communities the
relations between the inhabitants are close. Gossip is widespread. It is not easy to escape
from the influence of the community.

Although in the Turkish newspaper nowadays the word “honour crime” is used,
this is traditionally not the case. An honour killing is called honour purification.

In Turkey a judge can give reduction of punishment for perpetrators of honour
killing. The result is that perpetrators of any crime do claim honour as reason in order to
qualify for this reduction. This I call the “honour killing-as-cover”.

The victim of an honour killing is not always the defiled woman. It can also be the
man who sullied her honour. The aim of honour killing is to kill the guilty person. When
a boy rapes a girl, he is the one who has to be killed, not the girl. But when a woman
becomes a prostitute, it is she who is the guilty one, not the men who visit her. If both the
man and the woman are guilty, as is the case with adultery, then both may be killed.
However, often families cheat with the question about the guilty one and may kill the
“rapist” of their daughter, who in fact is her lover.

Besides the discredited woman or the offender, there are other potential victims of
honour killing. The victim can be a newborn baby. A baby born out of wedlock defiles
the honour of the family. A blood relation of the honour offender can also be the victim.
In such a case the honour offender is out of reach, or the person killed in his stead is the
one who is held responsible. More the two victims are possible as well: the defiled
woman and/or her honour offender plus their family members. This is called the multiple
honour killing. In one case the victim survived the honour killing, which is exceptional.
An honour killing can also fail because the potential victim kills the honour killer.

An additional punishment for the female victim of an honour killing, is to deny
her a proper funeral. There is no ritual, no family members at the funeral and no
gravestone. Sometimes the honour killing is criticised. In one case study the killed
woman’s family accused her husband of not giving any attention to her. He therefore
didn’t leave her any choice but to commit adultery. Turkish women organizations
protested against the honour killing of a young girl in the South East of Turkey in 1996 and against the low jail sentence in an honour killing case in 1998.

An honour killing is a ritual and has a certain kind of formalization. It has to be clear that it is not just a killing, but also a purification. Theoretically a great many gunshot or knife stabs are applied. The victim is killed from near by. The honour killing is done at a public place (preferably with witnesses). The perpetrator is calm and cool. The victim has to be killed (to injure is not enough). The honour killer immediately turns himself in at the police and insists to have no regret. In practice an honour killing not always follows these stages.

Usually an honour killing is a planned action. A family council takes place in which the perpetrator is appointed. Preferably this is the underaged son, because he gets a lower jail sentence. The honour killer has to tell the police that he acted fully on his own, this to prevent other family members from being sentenced as accomplices.

The role of female family members in honour killings is not clear. In some cases there was the suspicion that they knew that an honour killing would take place, or that they assisted in the honour killing, or took responsibility for the honour killing in order to safeguard male family members against punishment. In two cases the woman played a more active role: she probably decided about the honour killing. In extreme cases the woman can commit the honour killing herself, as emerges from several articles in the Turkish newspapers.

Traditionally an honour killing is not left to an outsider. It has to be done by a member of the honour losing family. Occasionally however, an assassin is hired, in order to escape a trial. Other possibilities to escape sentences are to make the honour killing look an accident, a suicide or a disappearance.

Doing research on court cases of honour killing evokes the idea that defiled honour only can end in an honour killing. This is a distortion. Most honour problems are dissolved without bloodshed. These cases however don’t get publicity, because are not mentioned in the press and usually stay out of court. Alternatives of honour killing are to abandon the responsibility for the discredited girl by marrying her off, to send or cast her away or to divorce the discredited wife. Another alternative is to draw off as a family or let the honour offender draw off. A third alternative is to refrain from action. The family
pretends there is no honour problem, rationalizes the honour defilement or accepts the honour problem because it is combined with an economical advantage. A fourth alternative is to show a minimum of action, enough to make clear that the loss of honour is not accepted. This varies from ignoring the honour offender, to making a big row. Also to threaten with honour killing or ill-treating the woman is used in order to make her stop her illicit affairs. Sometimes excuses from the side of the honour offender may be enough to prevent an honour killing. In some cases dishonoured families have been satisfied with money. Another peaceful solution may be reconciliation at one of the holy Islamic feasts.

As a fifth kind of alternatives external authorities are called upon to solve the honour problem. Especially in case of elopements police and justice can help to mediate. Abandoning a baby born out of wedlock is an alternative for killing it. The traditional place for abandonment is the entrance of a mosque. The mosque officials will send the child to an orphanage. The sixth alternative is the least customary: the disgraced man takes his turn to dishonour the honour offender by sleeping with the wife of the honour offender or by eloping with the sister of the abductor. This doesn’t solve the honour problem, but may be seen as satisfying redress.

Although failure of these alternatives may lead to the final honour killing, in many cases other factors play a role as well.

Looking to the setting of honour killing, we see that often a loss of şeref – honour in the sense of prestige – plays a role. Various factors can be responsible for escalating the honour problem into an honour killing. The first category of factors is related to the pressure of the community. The degree of publicity in the own community is important: the more people know of the loss of honour, the greater the chance on honour killing. A direct confrontation with loss of namus increases the chance on honour killing as well. Another factor is the public accusation by an injured party. Isolation increases the chances of honour killing. When the deceived husband or the father or brother of an abducted girl cannot show themselves any more among their own Turkish public, the chance of honour killing may increase. What may be important too is the fear of loss of work. When a Turk with a shop is dependent on Turkish customers, he may fear that these customers stay away because of his honour defilement.
The second category of factors has to do with additional goals: by means of the honour killing not only the namus is purified, but something else is realized too. For a divorced man such an additional goal is to get custody of his children. After the divorce the children stay with the mother, but when the mother gets a boy-friend, her former husband cannot accept that his children are brought up by another man: this is very much şeref-degrading. By giving order to another family member to kill his former wife, he purifies his namus (as a Turkish villager usually still sees his former wife as his namus) and at the same time he becomes the custodian over the children. Another additional goal is to be able to marry the defiled daughter off to a first-class groom. Dishonoured girls, that don’t have their honour purified by an honour killing, usually can be married off too, by doing so their honour is purified. But these marriages are usually with a second-class man. After the honour killing the family not only has purified the namus, but at the same time has increased the possibilities of finding a good husband. A third person too may incite to an honour killing in order to realize his own goals: he wants to get rid of a person and makes use of the fact that this person offended a girl’s honour.

A third category of factors is provocations: some honour offenders are proud of their offences and are boasting about it. Then the defiled man not only is dishonoured in his namus, but also belittled and tarnished in his şeref (status/prestige). To make a girl pregnant and refuse to marry her is seen as another provocation. Verbal insults as “bastard”, “prostitute” and the like are seen as provocation as well, and sometimes meet immediate honour killing.

A fourth type of factors is related to specific features of the perpetrator. In ten out of twenty described honour killings the perpetrator or the accomplice is jobless. For jobless men their şeref almost exclusively is coloured by their namus: for these men it is very important to have a chaste wife and chaste daughters, otherwise they lose almost all the prestige that is left to them. Another factor in this respect is the relationship between honour killer and honour offender. In eight honour killings this relationship was very close: they were very close friends for many years. It may be that honour offences in close friendships are more severely punished. Another feature of the perpetrator may be that he is mentally ill: some honour killers imagine that their wife has a lover and kill her or her imagined lover.
A fifth type of factors is related to elopement cases. Although in some cases abductors are killed who are poor, already married or from another religion, these don’t seem the important points to resort to honour killing. The fact that the girl elopes just before her planned marriage is a more decisive factor. A sixth type of factors is related to cases of intra family honour killing, that is the honour killing of a female family member of the own family. Although the female has to be killed when her loss of honour is her own fault, families use to defend their own female family member and accuse the honour offender of rape or forced abduction. When a family kills it’s own defiled daughter there are special reasons. The mother or sister of the killed girl has a bad reputation and the girl owns or inherits this reputation, which has been proven by her dishonourable behaviour. In some cases the dishonoured girl has a stepmother, who is suspected to have incited her husband, the girl’s father, to commit honour killing. Sometimes the girl is seen as incorrigible: as the girl will continue to dishonour the family, the only solution is honour killing.

The seventh factor is the familiarity with weapons. This may have facilitated the decision to commit honour killing.

If the honour problems that lead to honour killing don’t occur in Turkey, but abroad in the Netherlands, other factors emerge. Being jobless in a foreign country is much more severe than being jobless in one’s own country. The chance that a jobless man in a Turkish community abroad will resort to honour killing is greater than back home in Turkey. An elopement abroad may end sooner in an honour killing, when the abductor is an illegal person. A marriage with such a person leads to the suspicion that not the bride is important, but the residence permit to be obtained. The pressure felt by the Turkish community in a foreign country is heavy: the first generation Turkish immigrants depend on one another. The wish to return to Turkey in the future makes the influence of the community even greater. An honour problem will be passed on to villagers in Turkey and this makes a holiday or a return impossible. Another important factor is the incompleteness of the family. In the Turkish community nobody wants to get mixed up with an honour problem, so a family dealing with an honour problem is left alone. When there is no extended family to mediate, the nuclear family members may
sooner decide for the most extreme solution of honour killing. Furthermore, in Holland the possibilities for loss of honour are far greater than in the Turkish villages: the Turkish women and girls become westernized and don’t want to obey the strict rules on honourable behaviour any more.

In order to expel honour killing the social control in the Turkish community has to be diminished. This will happen when immigrant children are successful in their schooling: then they can find jobs out of their own network and successfully escape from social control and gossip. Another important point is the way in which Turkish boys and girls get married: they are betrothed or married off at a far too early age to a partner from Turkey. When they fall in love with someone else, they are already bound. However, for people in Turkey migration to Europe is still very attractive, and therefore these early engagements will continue in the near future.