

Not ‘them’, ‘us’: The necessity of recognizing ‘harmful traditional practices’ in all communities

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Winner, Nazir Afzal Essay Competition (2020)

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Recommended citation: Leonard, M.M. (2020). *Not ‘them’, ‘us’: The necessity of recognizing ‘harmful traditional practices’ in all communities*. Nazir Afzal Essay Competition winner. Honour Abuse Research Matrix (HARM), University of Central Lancashire, UK.

So-called ‘harmful traditional practices’ (HTPs), such as honour-based violence and abuse (HBV/A), forced and child marriage, and female genital mutilation (Khan and Hall, 2020), are commonly assumed to be practiced only within certain communities (Bredal, 2014; Reddy, 2014; Ermers, 2018). ‘They’ are stereotyped as immigrants, typically from the Middle East/North Africa, or South Asia (MENASA), who value traditional patriarchal gender norms and moral codes so highly as to be willing – and ready – to sacrifice their children’s lives to preserve a family or individual’s honourable reputation (Helba et al., 2015). The reality, however, is more complex, and far less flattering to ‘us’ than many in Western developed countries would prefer to believe (Reiss, 2012; van der Zee, 2018). Truly eliminating these practices will require acknowledging this reality, including the long history of honour-related violence in Western developed countries, as well as the damage done by excusing, ignoring, and otherwise dismissing non-stereotypical cases of HTPs (Cohen and Nisbett, 1994; Mosquera et al., 2002; Guerra et al., 2012; Leonard, 2020).

Victims of HTPs are commonly assumed to be young women targeted by one or more male family members for ‘Westernized’ – i.e., rebellious or sexually expressive – behaviour which violates religious or cultural gender norms (Reddy, 2014, Leonard, 2020). As a result, HTPs are often erroneously understood to be practiced predominantly by immigrants from ‘patriarchal’ societies – often operationalized as Muslim or MENASA communities (Ermers, 2018). However, recent research indicates that these victims are not the only type of victim, or even necessarily the most common (Leonard, 2020). In a study of honour killings worldwide, Leonard (2020) found that men comprised over a third of the primary victims. Men are also victims of forced marriage; statistics from the United Kingdom’s Forced Marriage Unit indicate 10-30% of reported cases involve men (cited in Bates (2020)).

Nor are victims exclusively individuals with immigration backgrounds. In the same 2020 study of honour killings mentioned previously, Leonard (2020) found that nearly 15% of victims and seven

percent of perpetrators with known ethnicity were of white European or North American ancestry. Bates (2017), in her study of reported honour crimes in England and Wales, found that almost 10% of victims were of white British ancestry. Studies of forced and child marriage (Koski and Heymann, 2017; Bates, 2020) echo these results of non-Muslim or MENASA victims; Koski and Heymann's 2017 study of child marriage in the United States found the highest rates of child marriage among American Indian/Alaska Natives (10.3 per 1,000) Chinese (14.2 per 1,000) and Hispanic (15.9 per 1,000) individuals. A 2011 study on forced marriage in Germany found that 3% of victims were Christian (Mirbach et al., 2011). While statistics on forced and child marriage in Orthodox Jewish communities are limited, there is evidence that such marriages occur with some frequency (Sztokman, 2011; Sales, 2018). Forced and child marriages also occur within fundamentalist sects of Mormonism, a North American-originated religion (Carlisle, 2016; Weill, 2017).

Despite these statistics, professional investigatory guidance and tools, such as risk assessments, continue to direct the public and professionals' focus towards women of MENA and South Asian descent (Belfrage, 2005; LEC EGG, 2020). As a result, a number of studies (HMIC, 2015; Aplin 2019; Idriss, 2020) have found that official responses to HBV victims and the risks they face are inadequate, because police and victims' services providers do not recognize HTPs when they encounter them, and may dismiss the warning signs present in non-stereotypical cases.

The consequences of professionals' failure to properly identify and intervene on behalf of victims of HTPs can be devastating. Victims of honour-based violence/abuse may be subject to emotional and physical abuse by their families; victims of forced and child marriage are also at increased risk for intimate partner violence and domestic violence from their partner's family (Rauf et al., 2013). Victims of female genital mutilation face a lifetime of gynaecological, obstetrical, and psychological health complications (Reisel and Creighton, 2015). All victims of HTPs face increased risk of poor physical and mental health outcomes, including suicide (Reiss, 2012; Pridmore and Walter, 2013; HMIC, 2015).

In cases where victims have sought help, failures by professionals result in less care and safeguarding of victims (HMIC, 2015; Aplin, 2019). Perpetrators may also be emboldened by lack of deterrence or enforcement (Aplin, 2019). Inadequate or inappropriate intervention also may alert perpetrators that perceived acts or behaviours perceived as shameful are now public knowledge, thereby increasing the risk of violence, including murder (Janssen, 2018).

It is not only individuals who are endangered by stereotypes of practitioners of HTPs: policies to eliminate HTPs are often rooted in racism and xenophobia rather than evidence (Gibillini, 2014; Dutt, 2020). As a result, they disproportionately affect and even stigmatize certain communities, with little proof of their efficacy. Policies such as the Trump Administration's 'Muslim Ban', which stymie family reunification and asylum applications, have been justified by their respective governments on the grounds of preventing honour killings (USG, 2017; Volpp, 2019) or forced marriages (Bowlby, 2011). Instead, such policies separate families and criminalize MENASA and immigrant communities, which are already vulnerable due to racism, Islamophobia, language-barriers, and poverty (Bredal, 2014; Muižnieks, 2017). For example, Denmark's '24-year rule' – which prohibits marriage of non-Danish citizens younger than 24 years, has cut the rate of marriage for those with immigrant background, but there is no evidence available that it has affected forced marriages, in part because that data is not uniformly collected (Psaila, et al., 2016).

If harmful traditional practices are not just a 'them' problem, but an 'us' problem, and many policies to combat such practices harm vulnerable communities without aiding victims, how then might we actually eliminate HTPs? The answer lies in improving the identification of victims of HTPs beyond stereotypical conceptualizations. Accurate and unbiased identification of cases of honour crimes is essential to the implementation of appropriate preventative and protective public health and criminal justice responses (Shaw et al., 1996; Kilpatrick, 2004; Cooney, 2019). In order to more effectively identify and thus eliminate HTPs, practitioners and policy makers alike must:

1. Recognize that HBV is not unique to a particular culture, ethnicity, or religion. This includes removing references to honour cultures in official definitions and professional guidelines, trainings, and tools, or make explicit that honour killings are culturally and religiously neutral crimes; and providing examples and references to non-stereotypical victims and crimes.
2. Respond appropriately to potential – or actual – victims. Turning away or dismissing a victim because they do not fit the stereotype of HBV victims could have fatal consequences.
3. Eliminate policies and laws that criminalize minority communities, such as immigration bans or asylum restriction, and over-policing. These policies do not prevent HTPs and may in fact exacerbate them (HMIC, 2015; Volpp, 2019; Dutt, 2020).

While the implementation of the above recommendations will not immediately end all harmful traditional practices, they will improve the efficacy of subsequent interventions by improving the accuracy of the assessment of the at-risk population, including estimates of prevalence. Improved estimates allow law enforcement and victims' services providers to better direct resources, as well as evaluate the extent of the need for and potential efficacy of programs to reduce the incidence of these crimes (Cooney, 2019).

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