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HONOR KILLING: A FORM OF FEMICIDE

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THE WORD *FEMICIDE* IS NOT YET RECOGNIZED by spellcheck. Every time I use it, I am met with an angry red underline. This presents something of a disincentive for its use. We might say that the resistance to this concept begins in Silicon Valley. However, the word does appear in the dictionary.

I am not certain why I began to study honor killings. They are quintessential femicides, except among Hindus (but only in India) where men are often also killed for having violated caste rules.

Perhaps my inquiry had something to do with my own long-ago captivity in Kabul about which I've written in *An American Bride in Kabul* (2013). I had witnessed woman-hating at ground zero and one can never forget it (Chesler, 2006).

Like many other American feminists, I was also active in the civil rights and anti-war movements—but unlike most feminists, I had "once lived in a harem in Afghanistan." This is the opening sentence of my book *An American Bride in Kabul* (2013). I lived with my mother-in-law in a polygamous household in rather posh purdah; this meant I was not allowed out without a male escort. My father-in-law had three wives and twenty-one children—facts my Westernized husband failed to mention during our long American college courtship. I saw women in burqas stumbling around on the streets of Kabul, and pre-Rosa Parks, forced quite literally to sit at the back of the bus.

Therefore, I was aware early on that worldwide, most women were illiterate, impoverished, and forced to marry men not of their choosing when they themselves were still children. As girls, they were expected to meet impossibly high standards of subordinate behavior—and, if they failed to do so, they risked severe punishment. Their lives were far more difficult and endangered than American women's lives.

I began using the word *patriarchy* in 1961-1962.

I co-pioneered the study of violence against women in the late 1960s. I focused on women living in North America and Europe who had been psychiatrically diagnosed and hospitalized; were the victims of rape, sexual harassment, incest, intimate partner battering, pornography, and prostitution.

I also documented the profound double standards and anti-woman biases which led to good mothers losing custody of children to abusive fathers and husbands; women sentenced to long or life prison terms when they killed batterers in self-

defense; and the violence women faced as they fought for their reproductive, educational, economic, political, and religious rights around the world.

My generation of feminists believed in universal human rights. We were not multicultural relativists. We called out misogyny when we saw it and did not exempt a rapist, a wife-beater, or a pedophile because he was poor (his victims were also poor); or a man of color (his victims were also people of color); or because he had an abused childhood (so did his victims).

In the early 1970s, I was alarmed by the mass Muslim-on-Muslim, male-on-female gang-rapes in the war between Pakistan and Bangladesh. I knew that the victims' families would reject or kill them for having been raped. I wanted American feminists to understand the specific danger these rape victims were in but I had no single word to describe the use of rape as a *weapon* of war (as opposed to a spoil of war). I might have said this was a barbaric form of misogyny. I did not use the word *femicide* to describe these rapes.

Dr. Diana E. H. Russell's and Nicole Van de Ven's 1975-1976 *International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women* (1976) drew 2000 women from 40 countries. In dramatic first-testimonies, they documented and condemned crimes such as *female genital mutilation* (FGM), beating, forced prostitution, forced motherhood, forced sterilization, etc. Russell did use the word *femicide* to describe the assaults against women *because* they were women. *Femicide* appears on the cover of this important collection but not within its pages.

In 1979 Fran Hosken, in *The Hosken Report*, documented FGM globally. I do not believe that she used the word *femicide*, but her book is now packed away and I cannot check it.

By the 1990s and early 21st century, I was also concerned with the fate of kidnapped and sexually enslaved women in North Africa at the hands of Islamist paramilitary units; and in the increasing use of gang-rape as a weapon of war, in Bosnia, Congo, Guatemala, El Salvador, Rwanda, and Sudan.

It was not until repeated public gang-rapes took place in the Sudan in the 21st century that I described them as *gender cleansing*. But not necessarily as an example of femicide.

In the early 1990s, because I became involved in the Wuornos trial I read a great deal about the lives of prostituted girls and women and about serial killers (Chesler 1993). Then, in about 2004-2005, I recognized an equally or possibly more pandemic *domestic* example of just such femicides—sadistic “overkills” in terms of honor killing among Muslims globally, Hindus (only in India) and, Sikhs, to a lesser extent. Serial killers that targeted only close female relatives lurked in every family that upheld strict honor codes.

I had been reading the Memoirs of tribal women (primarily Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs), and their searing testimonies, coupled with my long background of feminist research led me to study a phenomenon that few Western feminists had explored.

In 2009, I published the first of four studies about honor killing. Titled *Are Honor Killings Simply Domestic Violence?* (2009); I did not use the word *femicide*.

In 2010, I published a second and far more major study titled *Worldwide Trends in Honor Killings* (2010). I used the word *femicide* twelve times.

I did not use it even once in my third study (2012) titled *Hindu vs. Muslim Honor Killings*—but I did use it three times in my fourth study (2015) titled *When Women Commit Honor Killings*.

Many Western feminists have never read these studies. They were published in an academic venue and by intellectuals who were viewed negatively as “conservatives.” I am referring to the distinguished Middle East Forum under the leadership of Dr. Daniel Pipes.

Those feminists who did read some of this work were a bit hostile and viewed them as “racist” or “Islamophobic.” Some felt that men broke women’s bones and shed their blood everywhere, including in non-honor-based societies—why single out men of color?

In my view, there was another reason not to look more closely at honor-based violence, including honor killing. Although the victims were mainly girls and women, and usually women of color, their killers were also men and women of color. Thus, Western Caucasian feminists (and academics of color in the West) dared not blame formerly colonized men of color for the crimes they commit against “their” women. They viewed themselves as personally guilty for the historical crimes of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism. Or, rather, they wished to virtue-signal their atonement for such historical atrocities.

I went on to collect my writings in this area and I published two volumes: One, in 2017 was titled *Islamic Gender Apartheid: Exposing a Veiled War Against Women* in which I continually used the word “femicide.” I published the second volume in 2018. It is titled *A Family Conspiracy: Honor Killing*. I also used the word *femicide* many times in this volume.

An honor killing is the cold-blooded murder of girls and women simply because they are female. (This is the definition of *femicide*.) Being born female in a shame-and-honor culture is, potentially, a capital crime; every girl has to keep proving that she is not dishonoring her family; even so, an innocent girl can be falsely accused and killed on the spot.

A girl's fertility and reproductive capacity are “owned” by her family, not by the girl herself. If a girl is ever seen as “damaged goods,” her family-of-origin will be responsible for her care for the rest of her life. This is a killing offense. Her virginity belongs to her family and is a token of their honor. If she is not a virgin, (or it is merely suspected that she may not be a virgin), the shame belongs to her family and they must cleanse themselves of it with blood; her blood.

Imagine growing up in a family where you are closely monitored, harassed, perhaps even beaten daily; threatened with death if you are seen talking to a boy or if your veil has slipped. Imagine knowing that members of your own family-of-origin might one day kill you for the slightest offense or for no offense at all--and coolly get away with it; imagine knowing that you cannot escape, that no relative, and no legal forum will protect your right to live and to live free from normalized violence.

Becoming too “Westernized,” wanting to choose one's own spouse, refusing to marry a first cousin, daring to have infidel friends or allegedly engaging in sex outside of marriage--are all killing offenses.

From a tribal point of view, this shame-and-honor code does enforce social stability but at the price of individual rights and personal freedom.

At first, I did not appreciate the advantages of marrying one's first cousin. However, upon consideration, I realized that one's mother-in-law/aunt might be kinder to a girl whom she has known since birth and whose family-of-origin may live nearby. Perhaps such a mother-in-law/aunt may not prohibit her daughter-in-law/niece from visiting her own mother. (This is sometimes the case).

Keeping money and land within one's own family has always been seen as important. First-cousin marriage maximizes this advantage.

The disadvantages of first-cousin marriage include all the consequences of inbreeding and lifelong misery in a marriage one may abhor.

The institution of polygamy, or so it is argued, allows first, second, third, and fourth wives to remain with their children and to continue family life as usual. Since divorce is unthinkable (for women) in tribal societies, this may be seen as a "kindness" to womankind.

Of course, the competition among male siblings for paternal attention and resources and between co-wives can be quite ugly. I saw this in Kabul and will never forget it.

Purdah protects privileged women from the lust and violence of non-family men; it does not protect them from boredom or from intimate family physical, psychological, and sexual violence.

In small, agricultural regions, entire communities, not just individuals, demand that misogynist honor codes be upheld. Any family that fails to kill a "disobedient" girl or woman will find that no one will marry their other children or deal with them economically. In this context, one can understand the claims made by countless honor killers, namely, that they were only acting in self-defense; that communal norms drove them to it.

By 2003-2004, I was writing about honor killings based on newspaper accounts, internet sources, first-person interviews, and on a proliferation of *memoirs*.

I began to think of such calculated conspiracies as "horror" murders, not "honor" murders. The shame belonged to the perpetrators, not to their vulnerable victims. My understanding of this subject only evolved over time.

By 2005, in my book *The Death of Feminism*, I reviewed the honor killings in the West and was astounded by the fact that so many were torture-murders. By 2007-2008, I called for law enforcement and school officials to recognize the signs of a potential honor killing. In the West, with a few Sikh exceptions, it seemed to be a Muslim-on-Muslim crime.

I also described honor killings in America such as that of Palestina Isa (1989) and Methel Dayem (1999); both were Palestinian-Americans. I wrote about Samia Sarwar/Imran who was honor killed in Pakistan in 1999 and whose case made world headlines. Her mother had arranged for and was present when a contract killer she'd hired murdered her daughter.

At that time, there were many more honor killings in Europe since there was a large immigrant, mainly Muslim, population there. Thus, in 2005, I wrote about some of the high-profile cases such as that of Tulay Goren (1999), Heshia Yones (2002), Fadime Sahindal (2002); Sohane Benziane (2002); Sahjda Bibi (2003); Shafilea Ahmed (2003); Hatun Surucu (2005); and Banaz Mahmoud (2006).

In 2009, as noted above, I published my first academic work on this subject in *Middle East Quarterly*, charting the specific differences between Western domestic violence and honor killing/femicide. While many insist that honor killings are like Western domestic violence, this is not the case.

In honor killings, murders are carefully planned conspiracies and may be perpetrated by multiple family-of-origin members. Brothers, uncles, fathers, and other male relatives usually commit the murder, although mothers, sisters, and aunts have also been known to collaborate in the murders of their female relatives sometimes, they are hands-on perpetrators.

Batterers who murder in the West are usually acting in an unplanned and spontaneous way. They alone are the perpetrators. Their own families do not assist them nor does the victim's family-of-origin. Invariably, their killers are husbands, not fathers. In the West, fathers rarely murder their teenage daughters. This is what happens in a classic honor killing.

Honor killings in the West are sometimes marked by excessive violence, such as repeated stabbing, raping, bludgeoning, or being set aflame. Such killings are similar to what serial killers sometimes do to unknown, often prostituted, women.

In the West, batterers and wife killers are not celebrated—they are shunned. If possible, they are also prosecuted. Hindus in India, to a lesser extent, Sikhs, and Muslims, worldwide, who commit honor killings, are viewed as heroes who have saved their family's honor. Thus, they feel no shame or remorse.

Researchers in the 20th century, (Ginat, Glazer and Abu Ras), others in the 21st century, (Berko, Brandon and Hafez, Ghanim, Feldner, Kulczycki and Windle, Lasson, Pope, Rosen, Saltzman, Storhaug, Weber, Welchman and Hossain, Wikan), studied the phenomenon of honor killing. Without exception, *scholars* agree that an honor killing is not like Western domestic violence.

Only those who believe that it is shameful to expose anything negative about Muslims, especially if it is true, silence such exposure by "shaming" it as racist and "Islamophobic."

In the 1990s and into the 21st century, an increasing number of journalists also began to cover honor killing cases, especially if the perpetrators were brought to trial; memoirs and books were written about honor killing and attempted honor killings among immigrants in the West and in developing countries. A number of important films appeared on this subject.

There is no way to "measure" the incidence of hidden crimes such as incest or honor killing. One can do so but only imperfectly.

The United Nations still continues to insist that there are only 5,000 honor killings, worldwide. However, in 2010, according to two legal researchers in India, there were roughly 900 *reported* honor killings in the northern Indian states of Haryana, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh alone while 100-300 additional, recorded honor killings took place in the rest of the country. According to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 800 women were killed for honor in Pakistan in 2010.

Both figures likely represent only the tip of the iceberg.

According to the Aurat Foundation (nd), a Pakistani human rights organization: "At least 675 Pakistani women and girls were murdered during the first nine months of the calendar year 2011 for allegedly defaming their family's honor." Almost 77 percent of such honor cases ended in acquittals.

Although no "true" measure of incidence is possible, I decided to do what was feasible. Therefore, I relied upon the global, English-language coverage of reported honor killings in 29 countries and territories as long as all the variables I wanted to study were known. Given these limitations, it is amazing that I found so many statistically significant differences.

In *Worldwide Trends in Honor Killing (2010)*, I studied 230 cases which took place between 1989-2009 in Europe, North America, and in the Muslim world. There were two kinds of honor killings or rather two very different targets. A classic honor killing targeted victims who were an average age of 17; the second, less frequent honor killing targeted victims who were an average age of 36. These age differences were statistically significant.

The younger-age victims were killed by their families-of-origin 81% of the time, worldwide.

The group of older-age women most closely resembled a Western-style domestic violence dispute turned murderous. They were usually killed by their husbands but even here, there were significant differences. Nearly half (44%) the time, murderous husbands were assisted either by their own families or by their victim's family.

Motives were significantly different across continents; in the West, victims were killed for being too "Western;" in the Muslim world, it was mainly for allegedly committing an "inappropriate sexual act." The rate of torture-murders were at their highest in Europe. Perhaps those who were tempted to assimilate had to serve as human sacrifices and object lessons of what could happen to those who "Westernized."

From the time I published this study, my incidence rate of Muslim-on-Muslim honor killing rates, (91%, worldwide), has been used again and again, both with and without attribution, and usually without proper context. After all, this percentage is true in only one study, and in a study limited by whether the honor killing was or was not fully reported in the English language media.

Even as I planned my third study, (a comparison of Hindu and Muslim honor killings in Pakistan, India, and the West), I continued to read and write about honor killing cases when and if they were reported.

I began to document such cases in 21st century North America, such as that of Khatera Sadiqi (2006); the Said sisters (January 2008); Noor Almaleki (2009); the Shafia sisters and their father's first wife, (2009). I continued monitoring the American and Canadian mothers who either lured their daughters to their deaths (the 2008 Said case in Texas); assisted their husbands in making a getaway (the 2011 Almaleki case in Arizona); or who knew that their daughter's bones would be broken but who chose to say nothing (the 2007 Parvez case in Canada).

My academic comparison of Hindu versus Muslim honor killings in India, Pakistan and globally documented significant differences in terms of motives. Hindus honor kill when caste violations are committed; Muslims for many different reasons; Hindus sometimes kill the men as well as women, whereas Muslims, rarely do. Hindus do not bring this custom with them when they come to the West; Muslims, and to a much lesser extent, Sikhs, do.

At the outset, I did not acknowledge the role that women played in honor killings as conspirators, collaborators, and as hands-on perpetrators. As the author of *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman* (2002), I should have suspected this, but since maternal filicide is such an unthinkable act, my understanding dawned slowly.

Women have internalized the same patriarchal and tribal beliefs that men have--and in addition, are more responsible for keeping other women in line, especially their daughters. Most mothers want to ensure that their daughters are allowed to live, marry, become mothers, and maintain honorable reputations.

Women are known instigators and collaborators, and are sometimes either the ones who lure their daughters home to certain death or are themselves hands-on perpetrators. Such mothers have rarely been charged in America.

Once I was certain about the probable *tribal* origin of honor killing, I made a point of stressing that. Surprisingly few Muslim or ex-Muslim dissidents "heard" me; they were too invested in blaming Islam. Even fewer *Islamists* understood that my conclusion helped support the argument that honor killings are not necessarily religiously mandated.

This is important because it gives genuine Muslim reformers a basis upon which to condemn it as "anti-Islam."

Ultimately, I held—and still hold--both the Hindu and Muslim leadership responsible for failing to abolish this barbarous custom.

Abolishing human sacrifice will require mass education, consistent law enforcement, and the vigorous assistance of the clergy.

I've been enormously privileged in that I've been able to put my scholarship to good use. Thus, on the basis of my studies, lawyers, and immigrant advocates have asked me to submit affidavits about honor killing in court cases where girls or women, in flight from being honor killed, were seeking political asylum or emancipation from their families.

In 2015-2016, Lisa Avalos, now a professor of Law at the University of Arkansas Law School, contacted me about our mutual interest in honor-based violence. She visited, we remained in touch. In 2016-2017, she organized a conference on this subject and invited a small group of grassroots activists—three from the UK (Rashida Begum, Ruth Beni, Diana Nammi), an American law enforcement officer (Christ Boughey), and myself. I was to be the only academic who had conducted studies of honor killings. This conference was to be hosted in April, 2017, at the King Fahd Center at the University.

It was not to be. A few days before the conference was to take place, Professor Avalos and Acting Director Tom Paradise, were forced to dis-invite me. Some pro-Palestine and pro-Islam professors warned them that there would be serious trouble were I even to appear via Skype, from afar. This administration-approved dis-invitation led to a small media firestorm.

But the story has a happy ending. One of the feminist activists with whom I work, Mandy Sanghera, based in the UK, said that dis-inviting me had dishonored us all. She vowed to create another conference, probably in the UK. I therefore appeared on a panel at University College London in November, together with Asma Ashraf, Sabin

Muzaffar, Anna Purdie, Mandy Sanghera, and Gwenton Sloley. I also appeared on a panel on this subject via Skype in Sweden.

When I first began this work, I did not fully comprehend how difficult it might be for a girl or woman to escape being honor killed. From birth on, she has been indoctrinated into believing that she has been born evil and has to cleanse that shame every minute of every day.

Such a girl will have no psychological understanding that she is a human being and entitled to individual or human rights. She will probably not view herself as an "individual," but as a daughter, granddaughter, sister, niece, and wife--as a member of a family, clan, religious, or tribal collectivity whose welfare she has been born to serve.

Her body does not belong to her but to the collectivity. If her first-cousin/husband beats her very badly, her role is still to remain with him. Her own family will be dishonored if she leaves her marriage.

Therefore, those who escape to save their own lives are among the bravest and most resilient of girls and women. Their families will pursue them forever and thus, they require new identities and the equivalent of a witness protection program. They pay a high price for their freedom and survival. They can almost never risk seeing their immediate or extended family again. Some find the price too high and return, most often to their detriment.

I am very interested in those who successfully manage such escapes.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Phyllis Chesler, Ph.D., is an Emerita Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at City University of New York. She is a best-selling author, a feminist leader, a retired psychotherapist and an expert courtroom witness. Dr. Chesler is a co-founder of the Association for Women in Psychology (1969), The National Women's Health Network (1974), and The International Committee for the (Original) Women of the Wall (1989). She is a [Senior](#) Fellow at the [Investigative Project on Terrorism](#), a [Fellow at the](#) Institute for the Study of Global Anti-Semitism and Policy (ISGAP), and on the editorial board of *Dignity*.

Dr. Chesler was an early 1970s abolitionist theorist and activist: She wrote about and delivered speeches which opposed rape, incest, pornography, sex and reproductive prostitution, sex trafficking, [and the absence of women's right to custody of their children](#). She organized and/or participated in demonstrations outside the movie *Snuff*; outside Dorian's Red Hand to protest the murder of Jennifer Levin by Robert Chambers after a night of drinking there; organized repeated demonstrations outside the Hackensack, New Jersey courthouse where the Baby M hearings were underway and outside the surrogacy pimp Noel Keane's NYC clinic; outside the courthouse when Joel Steinberg was sentenced for the murder of Lisa Steinberg; and [was involved](#) in numerous ways [in](#) the trial of Aileen Carol Wuornos for which she assembled a team of expert witnesses which were never called upon.

She is the author of 20 books, including the feminist classic *Women and Madness*, as well as many other notable books including *With Child: A Diary of Motherhood*; *Mothers on Trial: The Battle for Children and Custody*; *Sacred Bond: The Legacy of Baby M*; *Woman's Inhumanity to Woman*; and *Women of the Wall: Claiming Sacred Ground at Judaism's Holy Site*. After publishing *The New Anti-Semitism* (2003), she published *The Death of Feminism: What's Next in the Struggle for Women's Freedom* (2005) and *An American Bride in Kabul* (2013), which

won a National Jewish Book Award. In 2016, she published *Living History: On the Front Lines for Israel and the Jews 2003-2015*, in 2017 she published *Islamic Gender Apartheid: Exposing A Veiled War Against Women*, and in 2018, she published *A Family Conspiracy: Honor Killings*, and a Memoir: *A Politically Incorrect Feminist*. In 2020, she published *Requiem for a Female Serial Killer*.

Dr. Chesler has published four studies about honor-based violence, focusing on honor killing, and penned a position paper on why the West should ban the burqa; these studies have all appeared in *Middle East Quarterly*. Based on her studies, she has submitted affidavits for Muslim and ex-Muslim women who are seeking asylum or citizenship based on their credible belief that their families will honor kill them. She has archived most of her articles at her website: www.phyllis-chesler.com

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